Solemnity of the Epiphany

I remember as a child, the Feast of the Epiphany always seemed to me to be a sad day. And I finally figured out that it was because in my home parish, there was a tradition of putting out the Nativity Scene just a couple days before Christmas, so when I saw the Nativity set up in Church, I would get doubly excited because this was the best sign that Christmas was very near. But the Parish would not put out the “3 Kings” until the Feast of the Epiphany. So, when I saw the Kings at the Nativity, it meant that Christmas was almost over. And that also meant that very soon, we’d be taking down our Christmas tree and putting everything away at home as well. So, I guess that’s why Epiphany made me sad.

But, of course, over the years, we realize that Epiphany is the next to the last installment in the Christmas Event. Today’s Feast celebrates the universality of the Birth of Jesus—-it tells us that Jesus was born not just for the Jewish people, but for all people in every generation, of all nations, and of every Faith. This brief Christmas Season will come to an end next Sunday when we celebrate the Feast of Jesus’ Baptism, and the official beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

Today’s solemn Feast of the Epiphany should not make us sad; in fact, we should rejoice that Jesus came for Jews and Gentiles, which includes all of us. But I think we would agree that this Feast, though not sad, is somewhat mysterious as we hear about these “Strangers” from the Far East, sometimes referred to as Kings, or Magi, or Astrologers, or Wise Persons. I like to call them “Seekers”---those who observed what was happening in the world all around them---those who were willing to go anywhere, take any risk, and spare no expense to “seek after” to what, or to Whom, the Star would lead them. Since they were non-Jews, they were Gentiles, and therefore Pagans. They believed in “divinities”, Powers greater than they were, but it was not defined for them and other Gentiles as it was for the Jews who believed in the One God Who had revealed Himself to them over the generations through the Patriarchs and the Prophets and the Gift of the Law of Moses. These “Strangers” followed a “Star” because they were wise enough, and open enough, to realize that Star represented an event of major importance, and they were willing to endure whatever inconvenience, expense, and danger to find out for themselves what that was.
One of my young great nephews received a really nice telescope from Santa Claus at Christmas, and while I was at home, we visited and blessed their new home. He wanted so badly to show me the telescope, but it was a very cloudy and rainy night and we couldn’t see anything.

That’s why today’s First Reading from the Prophet Isaiah is so significant because it tells us that “while darkness covers the earth and thick clouds cover the people, (yet) upon you the Lord shines….Nations shall walk by Your light, and kings by your shining radiance.” When the Light comes, it conquers the darkness and the clouds are dispelled; that’s when we can see the Stars clearly, or “see” whatever the Lord wants us to see.

Of course, besides the darkness and clouds that can keep us from seeing the Light in the world around us, there’s also “darkness that covers us” in other ways. Our lives have all been covered by the darkness of this incessant COVID Virus and its variant forms; there’s also the “darkness” of the social sins of racism, injustice, and the divisions that have grown so deeply among people in our Society with conflicting viewpoints, and the great challenges resulting from the economic struggles we’re all experiencing; there’s also the “darkness” that results from the awful natural disasters such as the tornadoes last month, and more recently the awful wildfires in Colorado that left more than 1,000 homes in ashes, and those residents’ lives in ruin.

And besides those forms of “darkness” around us, there’s also the “darkness” within us---the sins that each of us struggles with and which is a primary reason why Jesus came---to bring us His Mercy and call us to Repentance.

Many are the “clouds” that cover us on the outside and within; many are the obstacles that block, hinder, and distort the light. But, as Isaiah said, “upon you the Lord shines!” That is what gives us Hope. The Light of Christ dispelled all the “darkness” of the world on the original Christmas Day, and He continues to show that Light by His unconditional Love and His limitless Mercy.

St. Francis de Sales put it so beautifully and succinctly: “My past no longer concerns me; it belongs to Divine Mercy. My future does not yet worry me; it belongs to Divine Providence. What concerns me and what challenges me is today, which belongs to God’s Grace and to the devotion of my heart and my good will.” The Joy of Christmas should help us to live as much in the present
moment as we can, as we experience God’s Mercy for our past sins, and as we are filled with Hope for all that is still to be.

What makes these “Three Seekers” so admirable is that they didn’t allow their pre-conceived notions, nor their expectations, to influence the reality that they found. When they originally saw the Star, they immediately interpreted it to signify some major world event, or the birth of a new powerful King. They didn’t find what they were looking for in some worldly powerful City, like Jerusalem, but in a modest house in poor-Bethlehem. The Star led them, despite Herod’s attempts to deceive them, to a “Child with Mary, His mother”. And these non-Jews, and non-believers, were given the “eyes of Faith” to see this Child for Who He is, which is why “they prostrated themselves and did Him homage”.

And they gave Him their precious Gifts: Gold---a symbol of the Child’s Kingship; Frankincense---a symbol of the Child’s Divinity; and Myrrh---a symbol of the Child’s humanity and His mortality. Those Gifts were so appropriate because they were able to see this helpless Child as a “King” of a very different sort---a King of a Kingdom that, as Jesus will eventually define it, is not of this world; a Kingdom of justice, love and peace.

I don’t know if any of you have heard of a new Film Series known as “The Chosen”?? It’s a new multi-hour depiction of the Life of Jesus, “the Chosen One”, and those He Himself “chooses” to follow Him and to become a part of His new Kingdom. While I was at home with my Family for a few days over Christmas week, we “binge-watched” most of this 15-part series (and I hope to watch the remainder of it soon). The Series does a great job of depicting how the Jewish people had been longing for a thousand years, and scores of generations for the Messiah to come. But Jesus’ biggest challenge was in trying to get them to realize His Kingdom was not about “overthrowing” the Romans who were occupying Israel, nor undermining the Religious Leaders. His power was in moving people’s hearts to see that Love is more powerful than Force; and Mercy is a greater gift than domination. While the Series takes some liberties with the Gospel accounts, it’s a beautiful and touching portrayal of Who Jesus is; if you have a chance to see it, I encourage you to do so.

The amazing reality of this Feast is that while on the original Epiphany, the Wise Persons/Astrologers/Kings/Seekers were seeking for what the Star led them to, now in these days of Jesus’ Kingdom among us, Jesus is the One searching for us. Jesus seeks our hearts, desiring to fill us and to transform us with the Light of
His Love, and the Life that He gives us through the Sacraments, especially here in the Eucharist. When we allow Jesus to establish His Kingdom in our hearts, the “darkness” of sin within us is dispelled, so that we in turn can let the Light of Jesus shine forth through our lives to those around us. We become like “little Stars” that can dispel the darkness in the world around us, and lead others to find the One Who can help them to be freed from whatever it is that might hold them in bondage.

Dear Family of Faith, what about us? What do we choose to give Jesus as we find ourselves 2 days into this new year? Even when we take down our Christmas decorations and put everything away for another year, we need to remember that in this New Year, we’re beginning another chapter in our own Pilgrimage of Faith. What can we learn from these Wise Persons---these Seekers of the Truth---to help us make this New Year happy and blessed? I’m sure we don’t have gold, frankincense or myrrh to offer the Child Jesus; I’m also sure that’s not what the Christ Child would even want from us. What I’m pretty sure this Child, Who is our Savior, wants from us is the one thing that is uniquely ours to give----and that is our free will.

Every time we freely choose to give Jesus our Heart---every time we freely choose to give Him the right choices we make in favor of living a virtuous life rather than a sinful one----every time we freely choose to show mercy to those who have offended us, or to be just in our dealings with our neighbor, or to be truly charitable and loving in the ways we reach out to those in need, we are giving Jesus a greater treasure than these fine gifts of gold, frankincense or myrrh. When we choose to live lives of Joyful and Courageous Faith, and humbly prostrate ourselves to submit to following God’s Will in our daily lives, we give him all that matters to Him.

Christmas and Epiphany make all the difference in the world, and they remain the greatest Cause of our Joy, and the best GOOD NEWS in the history of humanity. If we can give this dear Christ Child, our Savior and the Savior of all the World, the precious Gift of following Him faithfully, courageously and joyfully in the midst of the “darkness” around us; if we can continue living in the “Present”, knowing that Jesus is with us, and staying with us always, this will be a truly Happy and Blessed New Year!

God bless you!