

Solemnity of the Epiphany
January 6, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 2:1-12

For almost fifteen years now we have celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany with a Three Kings Celebration. We'll do the same tonight. Our lessons and carols service will be followed by Benediction, then we'll all go downstairs for a pot-luck dinner, at the end of which three people will find dimes under their cake. Those three will be our three kings; we'll crown them, and then they will serenade us with the hymn, "We Three Kings."

Yet in all of this "Three Kings" is a misnomer. The "three" comes from the fact that three gifts were brought to Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh; but we really don't know how many men brought these gifts, only that there were more than one. The "kings" part comes from the prophecy of Isaiah 60:3, which states, "The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." The wise men, probably astronomers of means, followed the light of a star and came to the light of life, Jesus Christ. But had they been kings, we would know their names. In reality, though we have a tradition that names them, we don't really know who they were or exactly where they came from. They are anonymous, but they were wise; and God protected them from harm. Thus, they represent every person who comes to Jesus offering precious gifts, and they possess the virtues all of us need if we are to let Jesus save us: humility, wisdom, and obedience.

There is a king mentioned in the story, but he is not a king to celebrate or honor. King Herod attempted to deceive the wise men into doing his dirty work, and though our Gospel today does not relate this horrible incident, when he found out that the wise men were wiser than he, Herod killed all the boys under two years of age in Bethlehem.

Herod's rejection of Christ the King prefigures what would happen three decades later when his son Herod was on the throne. The rulers of both the Temple and the state, as well as the scribes and Pharisees, rejected their Messiah and handed him over to the powerful among the Gentiles. Pontius Pilate, the representative in Judea for Caesar, the Roman Emperor, then had Jesus put to death.

Jesus' rejection by the powerful contrasts sharply with how the lowly received Him. First, He put together a band of laborers, fishermen, and tax collectors to be his disciples. Then these same men converted Jews and Gentiles by the thousands after Jesus' resurrection and the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul himself says in the first letter to the Corinthians, "Not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth," but they, like the wise men, came to Jesus in droves, offering their very lives to Him who was born King of the Jews.

The powerful continued to reject Jesus, as the rulers in Jerusalem finally prevailed upon the emperor to initiate a persecution of the infant Church, so that in 64 A.D. Nero began the first of many state-sponsored attempts to thwart God's will. Thousands perished in what the Bible calls the Great Tribulation, which lasted until 67 A.D. Thus, we see in the acceptance of Jesus by the lowly and the

slaughter of the innocents by the powerful a prefiguration at the Epiphany of an historical truth: the humble bring Jesus gifts, while the proud try to kill Him.

Not only does this narrative uphold the superiority of humility over pride, we also learn just how wise the wise men were. Where Herod, the powerful one, is both oblivious and deaf to the true will of God, the wise men not only find Jesus by the leading of a star, but their lives were preserved because they were obedient to the will of God as it was revealed to them in a dream. Their obedience saved their lives; and this, too, is a prefiguration of the dynamic between the powerful and lowly as it played itself out over the next seventy years.

Remember the victims of the Great Tribulation, and how Jesus had promised, “By your endurance you will gain your lives.”? The Book of Revelation shows these martyrs, obedient to the end to the will of God, safe and sound in heaven beneath the altar of God. They cry out for vengeance upon those who slaughter the innocent, and then they get to see it. Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D., and with that fall the very people who had crucified Jesus and then persecuted His young Church died by the thousands, over a million deaths total.

In rejecting God’s will, the powerful paid a heavy price, but the humble and obedient are in heaven today, safe and sound, just like the wise men who escaped death by doing what God told them to do. This same circumstance has played itself out over and over down through the centuries. Martyrs like Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein receive their reward in heaven, while their persecutor died in a bunker by his own hand, but not before he first killed his own wife. Obedience issues in life, and disobedience in death.

It is God’s will that the lowly should shame the strong. Our Gospel today quotes the prophecy that states lowly Bethlehem will be the origin of the King. By choosing to raise up good from the lowly and despised of the world, God showcases His grace. It is made obvious that Jesus is at work if the instruments of His grace are people of low estate, disrespected by their peers. As St. Paul reminds us, God’s strength is made perfect in weakness.

This principle is an important affirmation of our work here in Scranton. If we want our mission to continue to succeed and flourish, we must embrace our city’s lowly reputation in the eyes of the world. While we can be justly disgusted by how our civic leaders have turned our hometown into a spectacle for the world to laugh at, we cannot be sheepish or bashful about the work we do here. It is through cities like ours, just like Bethlehem, that God shows He is at work in the hearts of those humble enough to accept His will. If nobody knows our name, we can take solace in the paradox that nobody knows the names of the Wise Men either. But we do know their works, and this should be our hope and prayer for our own legacy. Our names may well be forgotten by the world, but God knows them; and we hope they can be found written in the Book of Life. In heaven we’ll learn the names of the Wise Men. But before we pass from this life we’ll know something else: whether the world remembers our good works. May we all be more zealous for good deeds than for others to know who did them.

Thus, not knowing the wise men’s names, and knowing that they were not kings at all, are real blessings to us. Most of us, after all, aren’t very powerful. We aren’t of noble birth. But we are the people God has used to build up his Church. We are humble, wise, and obedient, just like the Wise Men from the East.