

HOMILY FOR EPIPHANY-JANUARY 3, 2021

READINGS: Isaiah 60: 1-6;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 72;

Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6;

Gospel of Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany: Embracing love in the ordinary

We begin our reflection with a question: What changes have you made in your life because of COVID-19 pandemic? When the coronavirus was declared pandemic last March, we embarked on a new journey-- an unplanned journey to an unknown destination. This unplanned journey was urgent and we began the journey without much preparation. We didn't know when we would come to the end of the journey or the types of challenges we would face on the journey. Today the Church celebrates the very popular festival of the Christmas Season-- the Solemnity of Epiphany. The word "epiphany" means "manifestation" or "showing". As a Christian festival, Epiphany means the visit of the Magi-- the wise men from the East to the newborn, baby Jesus. Usually, we contemplate how their visit is a sign of Jesus' kingship in the world. But today, let us consider what the journey meant for those who were on that special unplanned journey.

As part of our celebration, the Church has given us three readings inviting us to reflect on the spiritual significance of the events surrounding this festival. We begin with the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The writer of this part of the Book of Isaiah is referred to as the "Third" Isaiah who lived at the time of the return of the exiles from Babylon. The beautiful passage begins with: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you". Isaiah began his prophecy with a tone of hope to the returned exiles. As the returned exiles ended one journey in captivity, they had returned to their country to begin another journey-- a journey to rebuild their lives in the land of their ancestors. Life was hard and the going was tough. The people didn't know what was ahead of them in this journey and how the journey was going to end. Isaiah's message was to assure the returned exiles that even though they would meet difficulties and hardships, all would be well because God was with them. The prophet wrote, "The Lord's glory will appear over you". The prophet proclaimed that not only the returned exiles would rebuild the land and their lives, but; their land would be a place for all people to come and encounter God. The prophecy ended with this, "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord". The prophecy offered the returned exiles hope and encouraged them to have faith in God.

The prophecy of Isaiah in the first reading leads us to the Gospel story of the visit of the Magi to Jesus. This story is reported only in the Gospel of Matthew. Today's passage is an example of what scripture scholars refer to as "birth narrative". In the Bible, birth narratives are stories about the birth of someone who later became great. According to biblical scholars, the story was composed, not to describe a birth exactly

as it occurred, but to teach the significance of that person's birth, as it is later understood in the light of subsequent events.

The Evangelist does not tell us the number of wise men but tradition sets it at three. The number corresponds to the number of the gifts offered to the infant Jesus. Traditionally these three people represent the non-Jewish people-- the Gentiles at that time. The Gospel passage tells us about the journey of the wise men but it doesn't describe the type of journey encountered by the wise men.

The audience of the Evangelist was mostly Jewish in background. The Evangelist Matthew therefore cited some passages from the Old Testament in his birth narrative. For example the Evangelist cited a quotation from the Book of Numbers: "A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel" (24:15-17) to refer to the significance of the star that led the wise men on their journey. The Evangelist also cited a quotation from the Book of the Prophet Micah (5:1) "And you Bethlehem, land of Judah.... from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel" to refer to Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus. According to the prophet Micah, Bethlehem would be the source of the dynasty of David to whom God had promised fidelity.

Matthew's intended interpretation of today's birth narrative was to teach that Jesus, the Messiah for all nations, was a descendant of David who came from Bethlehem. It is with these signs from the Old Testament-- the named birthplace-Bethlehem and the link to the line of David, a star in the heavens that the wise men saw and followed to meet the newborn King.

The revelation of Jesus as the Messiah of all nations is what Paul talked about in his Letter to the Ephesians. According to St. Paul in the second reading, it is the Holy Spirit from God that had revealed the mystery of God's saving act in Jesus to him. Paul taught the early Christians that he had passed down this knowledge about the mystery to them. The mystery is that the Gentiles have also become the people of God.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, how do the three readings reflect the festival of Epiphany? Today's three readings point to the fact that the promises that God made to the Jewish people had been fulfilled in Jesus. The promises that God made to the Jewish people have been revealed to the wise men who symbolized the non-Jewish people. The Bible does not tell us what became of the wise men after their encounter with the Lord. However, we can discern that the wise men came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

We can also discern that the journey of the wise men was not without challenges and difficulties--we are told that after seeing the baby Jesus, "they left for their own country by another road". They may have been some challenges, some unexpected situations on their journey, yet they persisted in making their journey to encounter the Christ.

What does this celebration mean to us as people who believe in Jesus? By virtue of our baptism in the Lord, every year we celebrate this Solemnity as part of our

spirituality in our faith journey to God. Over the past years, our journey to this celebration has been the same. This year things are different due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps, as we begin a New Year we can use today's celebration to reflect on the events of our faith journey over the past year. We have been on a different journey full of uncertainties.

So, how has the pandemic affected our lives? This brings us to the question at the beginning of the homily: what changes have we made in our lives because of COVID-19 pandemic? Every year our celebration of the Solemnity of Epiphany reminds us that God is truly with us in his Son Jesus. In Jesus, God's love never changes even in an unpredictable time like the COVID-19 pandemic. This is our hope. God was with the Jews who returned from Babylon and who rebuilt their lives. Our belief that God is still with us on our unplanned journey should reflect on the changes that we have made in our spiritual lives. This is the time when we are encouraged to change our hope into actions of love, caring, compassion and peace. When we strive to respond to the pandemic by embracing love, we all journey together in the spirit of the love of Christ. Epiphanies occur when the extraordinary is revealed in the ordinary-- that God is truly with us. This is the spirit of Epiphany.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance