

Epiphany
January 2, 2022, Epiphany of the Lord
Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12
Fr. John

The celebration of Epiphany usually conjures up, in many minds, images of the visit of three kings with the Christ child as pictured in many of our Christmas cards or statuary displays in churches. And the fact that they brought gifts lays the basis of our custom of exchanging gifts at this time of year.

This is all very nice. However, we need to unpack and explore a deeper significance of this story if we are to see it's relevance in our contemporary world'

First of all, we need to understand what the term 'epiphany' means - a word that we don't generally hear in everyday conversation. On this day we normally equate it with Christ's birth and spell it with a capital 'E'. But the word can be spelled with a small 'e' and refers to any new awareness, discovery or insight that suddenly strikes us. In biblical or spiritual terms it might be referred to as a '**revelation**'.

In this case what might this revelation be? And why does Matthew's gospel include it as part of his infancy narrative? Well, this gospel was initially written for the benefit of Christians who came from a Jewish background - people who were very steeped in how God had chosen them initially to reveal Himself. Of course, they felt very honoured and highly favoured from among all the nations that God could have chosen. The Hebrew Scriptures [our Old Testament] certainly convey this and the people of Israel cherished and guarded this heritage against all foreign and pagan religions and influences.

So the Magi, mentioned in the gospel, were not only foreigners from the mysterious East, but as astrologers, were also coming from a far different spiritual and religious background. Today, we might refer to their beliefs as 'New Age.'

Matthew tells us that they were led to Christ by following a strange star which had appeared in the heavens and which they believed was announcing the birth of a great new king or emperor.

Ironically enough, it seems that no one in Jerusalem, the very centre of Judaism, knew about or noticed the star. It would appear that spiritual 'outsiders' were more cognizant of what God was doing, than those to whom He had originally revealed Himself.

So what epiphanies or revelations was the author of Matthew's gospel trying to convey to his Jewish audience and even more importantly how does it speak to us in our moment of human history?

As Catholics and as Christians, we have spent much time and energy in the past defending our faith against heresies and other non-Christian traditions and beliefs.

Now as necessary and noble as it may have been to guard the 'deposit of faith' as our catechism defined it, we may have lost sight of the fact that God the Creator may have had a bigger plan than what we 'insiders' may have imagined.

Could it be that the 'star' which the Magi followed be something within the deepest part of the heart of all human beings which unites all of us no matter what our background might be.

Have we as Christians become so insular and tribal about our faith to the point where we have made God smaller in our perception? A God which fits only **our** cultural and racial background. Is it possible that the epiphany we need is the realization that the Incarnation ultimately is about what it is to really be a human being as God intended and as Christ modelled so perfectly regardless of whether we are Christian, Moslem, Jewish, Hindu, or Buddhist, gay or straight, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, believer or non-believer.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians says: 'In former generations, this mystery was not made known to humankind as it is now revealed to His apostles and prophets by the Spirit. That is that the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel'.

I'm sure Paul, in stating that was opening himself up to being condemned by the religious 'purists' of his day. But he had a good mentor - Jesus himself who suffered the same criticism.

Can it be that the Magi, who represent all who seek Truth, and follow the star that leads to it, no matter what their background, are called by the same Christ as we are.

In this lies the relevance of Epiphany - that it is an on-going awakening in our world still so divided and polarized. It is an awakening to the vision of a Creator whose vision is that one day we will share in the kind of humanity which Jesus lived so perfectly.

It is our hope and prayer that as we enter a new calendar year that we, as a human race, can take a few steps in that direction.

And in doing so - some day fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah that all nations shall come to God's light - bringing their gifts and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.