

Feast of the Epiphany

January 7, 2007

INTRODUCTION: 587 years before Christ, God's people were conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians and taken to Babylon, the area around modern day Baghdad. Fifty years later the Persians, the people who lived in what is today Iran, conquered the Babylonians and they allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. In our first reading the prophet enthusiastically proclaims this return: "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come..." The prophet, however, sees in this event something much more wonderful than the Jews' return from captivity. He sees Jerusalem becoming the center of spirituality and light for all the world. People would come from all over to visit Jerusalem and to be nourished by the spiritual light and life radiating from it. This vision of the prophet begins to be fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem. From there his light spreads out to all the world. As described so beautifully in the book of Revelation, those who follow Christ's light will enter into a new and eternal Jerusalem.

HOMILY: Today, the feast of the Epiphany, is the original feast of Jesus' birth. Eastern Christians were celebrating the birth of Jesus on January 6th years before Christians in Rome began to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th. Because Epiphany was already well established as a major feast by the time the Roman Church started celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th, the Roman Church could not ignore it, so they centered on the coming of the magi as the theme for the feast of the Epiphany. This extended the Christmas celebration for a number of days, which is appropriate, because Christmas is too wonderful an event to limit to only one day.

The word Epiphany comes from a Greek word which means coming to light or appearing. The shepherds who lived in the area of Bethlehem had already had their epiphany when the angels announced the birth of Jesus to them. Today we commemorate God's revelation of the coming of his Son to magi. Magi is a term that designated persons who were priests of a pagan cult and were experts in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts. Their primary job would be to act as advisors to the rulers of the people of Persia (ancient people who lived in modern day Iran). As advisors to the king and his court they would have studied the stars for messages from the gods. As pagans they remind us that Christ's saving light is meant for people of every race and every nationality.

If we understand the word Epiphany as a general word indicating God revealing himself to anyone, then Epiphany does not end with the visit of the magi. God continues to reveal himself to all people. Some people respond to the revelation and some do not.

That is the point St. Matthew is making for us in today's gospel. The magi searched for Christ and found him. The same opportunities to find our Lord were available to Herod and the Jewish high priests, but they didn't find him, either because they were uninterested or they had hostile intent. Herod wanted to find him in order to kill him and the high priests, although they knew where the Messiah was to be born, couldn't be bothered going there themselves to look for him. Christ can be found by anyone whose intent to find him is honest and who doesn't give up the search. Christ wants us to know him, that's why he came to us and he came a long way to make it possible for us to find him. We have to go part of the way too. He will not disappoint us if we really want to know him. May God's Spirit fill us with light so we can continually find him in new and deeper ways.

2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time January 14, 2007

INTRODUCTION: Five hundred thirty years before Christ the Jews were exiles in Babylon. You've heard me mention this many, many times. Today's first reading is an announcement from the prophet that the Persians, who had conquered the Babylonians, were going to let God's people go home. Their cities and homes were in ruins during the time of their exile and the Persians were even willing to give them some material help to rebuild. God said he would forgive the sins of his people, their sins that brought on their exile, and God would take them back. God would make Jerusalem and Judea his spouse. The image of God marrying his people is an important biblical image and is the best symbol from our human experience that can be used to describe the love and intimacy God desires to have with his people. The image prepares the way for gospel account of the marriage feast of Cana.

HOMILY: I want to encourage you to make sure you have truly invited Christ into your homes and into your relationships, especially your marriage relationship if you are married.

Several years ago I read the story about a couple who bought a new home and spent a lot of money on interior decoration. The wife, who wrote the article, had a husband who wanted to hang a large picture of the Sacred Heart in a prominent place in their living room and the lady objected. It did not fit with the décor of their new home. But he insisted and reminded her of Jesus' words: "Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father." (Mt. 10,32) Being a religious person, she gave in to his wishes and hung the picture. In her article she told about a few incidents that happened because the picture was there. One visitor, who kept glancing at the picture, eventually commented that "Jesus doesn't look at you, he looks right through you." Another friend commented, "I always feel so peaceful in your home." She said one of the most striking things she noticed was that inevitably the conversation with friends and relatives was drawn to a higher plane. She felt overall the picture had a

good effect on their family. Her article concluded with the statement: "This much I know, when you invite Jesus into your home, you are never the same again."

I'm sure the couple in today's gospel would agree. Wedding receptions were major celebrations in the culture and time of Jesus. They went on for several days and planning for one would have been difficult, but running out of wine would have been a long remembered embarrassment for the bride and groom. So Jesus came to their rescue, with a little prompting from his mother. And he rescued them big time.

Others we hear about in the gospel had their lives changed significantly for the better by inviting Jesus into their home. Peter brought Jesus to his home and Jesus healed his mother-in-law. A little girl died who was the daughter of a synagogue official named Jairus. Jairus went to find Jesus and Jesus came to his home and raised his daughter to life. He healed a man of dropsy one evening while having dinner at the home of a leading Pharisee. He became good friends with Martha, Mary and Lazarus and visited them when he came to Jerusalem. When Lazarus died Jesus brought him back to life. This is not to mention how people's lives were changed in other ways because they opened their doors to Jesus.

Certainly, inviting Jesus into our lives begins by opening our hearts to him. But what if we lived in a country where it is illegal to be a Christian and the police came to our home, would there be enough evidence there to convict us? Do we have religious books or periodicals, any religious articles that remind us of our Lord or Mary or one of the saints, is there a bible somewhere within reach or is it on a shelf covered with dust? If our houses were bugged by the police, would we ever get caught praying with other family members?

When Jesus sent his disciples out he always told them to say "Peace to this house" whenever they entered a house. It is his desire to bring peace wherever he goes. In the book of Revelation Jesus makes this promise to us: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, (then) I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me." He will not invade our space. He wants to be invited in.

That goes doubly in marriage. St. John tells us "God is love." If people want love in their marriage, they need to have God as the foundation of their relationship. I always have major concerns about couples who call up and want to have their marriage at St. Boniface, but they've not been going to Church. They are missing the essential ingredient for a loving and successful life ahead. I always challenge them that if they want me to have their wedding, then I want to see them become serious enough about their faith that they start practicing it.

St. John tells us today this was the first of Jesus' signs. As a sign it shows Jesus' high regard for marriage. But it shows much more. It tells us Jesus was interested in more than just keeping the party going, that he came to bring abundant blessings to those who believe in him. Today he works greater miracle for us by changing bread and wine

into his own body and blood. May we be filled with his love as we receive the food and drink he gives us. Amen.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 21, 2007

INTRODUCTION – You’ve heard frequently of the Babylonian exile and how the Persians conquered the Babylonians fifty years later and allowed the Jews to return home. Many of the Jews in Babylon had become rather comfortable there and they did not return to Israel all at once. Little by little they came. Even a hundred years after they began to return they were still struggling to rebuild their cities and their civilization. The Persians were still in control of the entire Middle East which included Israel. Nehemiah, a Jew, had been a high level servant to the king of Persia and he asked his king to allow him to return to Israel to help his people rebuild. So the king of Persia appointed him to be governor of Israel. In Nehemiah’s efforts to rebuild the nation, he had to start with what was most important and that was to remind the people that God had to take first place in their lives. He realized much of the trauma his people had gone through at the time of their exile was because they had forgotten their God. In today’s first reading Nehemiah called for a general assembly of the people and the priest Ezra read God’s word to them. Remember, ordinary people did not have books in those days. Books were very rare and very expensive, since each one had to be individually written word by word. So, if the ordinary person were ever to know God’s word, someone had to read it or preach it to them. Ezra, thus, read God’s word to the people and interpreted it for them. The reading was most probably from the first five books of the bible. Notice that there was active participation on the part of God’s people as they heard the word, possibly for the first time: raising their hands, answering “amen,” bowing to the ground, listening attentively, weeping and rejoicing.

HOMILY - The central theme of today’s liturgy is God’s word. The people were saddened by God’s word in today’s first reading. Perhaps they recognized how they had failed to live up to it. But Ezra and Nehemiah told the people God’s word should bring us joy. Even if they had not been living by God’s word, on hearing it they could learn from it and start living as God instructed them. When we break the laws of our society, we may get thrown into jail. God doesn’t send the police around when we break his laws, but when we ignore his word, it’s going to catch up with us in the long run. So many people rationalize bad behavior by saying Jesus is a good guy. He won’t punish me for this or that. But they forget, Jesus didn’t come to punish us. He came to show us the way to happiness and eternal life. When we choose a way contrary to his teaching we bring unhappiness upon ourselves.

One of my favorite psalm verses is: "Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path." (Ps 119, 105) If you have to go somewhere in the dark, it's nice to have a flashlight to help you see where you're going. You can walk in the dark if you wish, but that would not be very smart and you might be likely to end up hurting yourself. When we try to make it through life without God's word, we're walking in the dark. We can't say God is punishing us if, while we're walking in the dark, we run into something or we fall. We did it to ourselves.

Nehemiah knew the people needed God's light if they were ever going to succeed in getting back on their feet. Jesus knows we need God's light. In today's gospel, Jesus is beginning his public ministry and he uses the Scriptures to describe the work he will do. People were impressed at first, but unfortunately, as we will hear next week, they rejected him.

Jesus said "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." "Today" is the important word here. It tells us God is speaking to us whenever we hear the Scriptures. Those who heard Ezra read the word of God and interpret it were hearing about things that happened almost a thousand years before, the stories of Abraham, Moses and the Exodus. But they saw its relevance for them that day. Jesus read from the book of Isaiah, written centuries before he was born, but he told his audience it had great meaning for them that day. "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." God's word always speaks to us because God is a living God and his Spirit continues to communicate to us through that word.

In our second reading today, Paul reminds us of the importance of community. He tells us we can't say I don't need a church, I don't need to come to Mass, I don't need to pray with all those other people. We do need to because we are part of the body of Christ and we can't say we do not need one another. When we separate ourselves from one another, we are denying the spiritual gifts God has given to others to help us and we are denying to others the spiritual gifts God has given us to help them. We need each other. We need to share our faith with each other, even if it is a matter of praying with one another. To sum everything up, we need God's word and we need each other to make it through this life to the joys of eternal life.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 28, 2007

INTRODUCTION- Matthew, Mark and Luke begin to tell us about Jesus' public ministry with the baptism of John the Baptist. They tell us nothing about what happened during those thirty years between his birth and his baptism except for the one instance when Jesus' parents lost him in the Temple at the age of twelve. I suspect Jesus lived a fairly ordinary life, working in the trade of his foster father, Joseph, as was the custom in those days. After Jesus baptism and his 40 days of trial and testing in the desert, they all move on to tell us about Jesus' public ministry in slightly different ways. St. Luke describes how Jesus began his public ministry with a visit to his hometown, Nazareth. In several places in his gospel, Luke tells us Jesus and his parents were devout Jews and faithfully followed God' laws. We would expect no less. Luke tells us it was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue every Sabbath. He was invited to give a reading from the Scriptures and he chose Isaiah. Then he began to comment on what he read and his comments were well received. We heard all of this in last Sunday's gospel. Today the story continues. We don't know specifically what happened, but what began as a good experience turned out very badly. His former friends and neighbors were basically asking, "Who does he think he is? Where did he get the authority to teach us?" Within a short time they attempted to throw him off a cliff. We don't know how he escaped their murderous intentions, but he did. Our first reading, as usual, prepares us for the gospel. Jeremiah the prophet heard God's call to preach God's word, a calling that would lead to suffering and rejection.

HOMILY- Calvin Coolidge, who was a man of few words, came home from church one day and his wife asked him what the preacher talked about. He said "Sin." She asked, "What did he say about it?" He said "He was against it!" If someone asks you what the preacher talked about today you can say "Just ordinary stuff!" "Ordinary" is the keyword of my remarks today. I think one of the reasons Jesus got into trouble in Nazareth was because he was so ordinary. His friends and neighbors could not conceive that he was any better than they were. St. Luke glosses over the conflict between Jesus and his neighbors with the one question he tells us they asked: "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" But if you read St. Mark's account of Jesus visit to Nazareth, Mark is very blunt. He tells us the people were asking "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given him? Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?" In that culture boys were identified by their father. Calling Jesus the son of Mary is an allusion to Joseph not being Jesus' natural father and would have been an insult both to Mary and Jesus. Their rejection of Jesus and their desire to kill him foreshadow the future of Jesus.

In today's second reading we heard one of the best known and best loved passages in Scripture: St. Paul's description of love. What is so beautiful about this passage is that it doesn't deal with those thrilling moments when all of our being is charged with excitement and joy. It deals with the ordinary, everyday kind of love that ordinary living requires. Paul describes this kind of love by telling us what love is not rather than what it is. It is not jealous, pompous, rude or selfish, it is not short-tempered nor does it hold grudges. It is patient and kind and trusting and willing to put up with all kinds of little annoyances. This is not about falling in love – a period of infatuation that may or may not lead to real love. Paul is talking about our ordinary day-to-day contact with other people, some of whom we may not like a whole lot, but whom we learn how to be kind to nevertheless. Practicing this ordinary kind of love doesn't always sweep us off our feet, but it does bring a kind of joy, because our vocation and our fulfillment in life is to learn how to love one another.

On this fourth Sunday of Ordinary time we hear about ordinary things. But in the ordinary is the extraordinary if we know how to find it. As the poet George Eliot said: "If we had a keen vision of all that is ordinary in human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which is the other side of silence." It is through ordinary things that God touches our lives most of the time, through prayer and music, through the same Scriptures we've heard again and again, through bread and wine, and through the weekly Eucharist. We are perhaps surrounded by the same ordinary people we've seen week after week for years. Through our being together in prayer we become one body in Christ, and in Christ we love and worship our heavenly Father. Sometimes it feels pretty ordinary, but for those who can see more deeply, the mystery we celebrate is awesome.