

Epiphany of the Lord

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 8, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

You may remember on Christmas day and the second Mass of Christmas, the Gospel of Luke told us, after the shepherds had come to tell Mary and Joseph all they had seen and heard and then were leaving, "Mary treasured all these messages and continually pondered them in her heart."

Now this is what I propose that we must do -- continue to ponder all that we have heard about the birth of Jesus and the events surrounding it. Ponder and continue to come to a deeper and deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what his meaning is for us, and for all peoples.

Today, if we listen to the scripture lessons carefully and ponder them, we will discover that -- a deeper meaning about Jesus for us and for all peoples.

I think the best way to start is to listen again for a moment to our second lesson, where Paul instructs the people at Ephesus, that community of Christians in the Greek city of Ephesus:

"By revelation God gave me the knowledge of God's mysterious design as I have explained it. On reading them, you will have some idea of how I understand the mystery of Christ. And this mystery was not made known to past generations, but only now through revelations given to apostles and prophets. Now the non-Jewish peoples share the inheritance in Christ Jesus. Non-Jews are incorporated and are to enjoy the promise. This is the good news."

That's a dramatic proclamation by Paul, telling us the Jesus came, not for a few, but for the whole human family. When God entered into human history, it was not for the "chosen" people, the elect, the few, but for every member of the human family in all of human history. This is the good news.

It was especially important for Matthew to insist on this good news. In writing to the community from which his Gospel evolved, that community was a community of Jewish people, Jewish Christians, and they clung to the idea that God had come for the chosen people alone, and if you wanted to share in God's life and the blessings that God gives to the world, you must become a Jew. So they fought against the idea that Paul was promulgating, that Gentiles could come in to the church, non-Jews could become followers of Jesus without becoming a Jew first, without being circumcised, without pledging to follow the Torah, the 613 laws that had evolved from the time of Moses. You had to be a Jew first and then you could follow Jesus.

Paul was saying, and Matthew was now trying to bring this to his community, that this is the real mystery about Jesus. Jesus is not for a few; Jesus is for the whole human family. And we might wonder at first, "Why was it so hard for them to accept that?" Well, think about ourselves, how we have and some fundamentalist preachers in the Christian churches still say this: "Unless you know Jesus, you will not be saved." But Jesus came, not just to save every individual, but to transform the whole of the world, the whole of human history, the whole human race, so Jesus has come for all.

Matthew tries to get this across to the community by telling the story that we hear in today's gospel, and that community would pick up on elements of that story quite quickly. When they heard about the magi coming and representing all of the human race, they would immediately think of our first lesson, the marvelous passage from the prophet Isaiah that would proclaim when the chosen people had been in exile, their city destroyed and all the people carried off, and now Isaiah proclaims this message of hope and joy:

"Arise, shine, for your light has come. The glory of God rises upon you. Night still covers the earth and gloomy clouds veil the peoples, but God now rises and over you God's glory shines. Nations will come to your light," that is the Gentiles, the non-Jews, "and kings to the brightness of your dawn," like these magi that come in the gospel.

"Lift up your eyes around about and see, they are all gathered and come to you, your sons from afar, your daughters tenderly carried. This sight will make your face radiant, your heart throbbing and full. The riches of the sea will be turned to you, the wealth of the nations, the Gentiles will come to you. Those from Sheba will come, bringing with them gold, incense, all singing in praise of God."

What a marvelous message, and that's the message that Matthew was hinting at because he tells the story about these magi, actually astrologers, that is, people who study the stars and let their eyes be guided by that. These are outsiders. That was something against the Law. A Jewish person would be accused and guilty of idolatry according to the Law if the Jewish people read the stars and followed them, let them guide their lives. So Matthew was saying, yet these are the very ones upon whom God's light has come. That message is proclaimed about Jerusalem. Isaiah is saying the city, Jerusalem, is now where God dwells.

It is the light to all the nations and people are drawn to that light -- everyone is drawn to that light. So the people of Matthew's community would begin to hear what Matthew was saying. The whole thing about the star, they would remember from their knowledge of the book of Numbers where that is a reference that Matthew is using about something that is recorded about the history of the chosen people in that book of Numbers, "A star shall come forth from Jacob." This is a pagan person proclaiming a person to the then king of the chosen people.

"Balaam pronounced this oracle. The one who hears the words of God who has knowledge from the Most High sees the vision of the Almighty in ecstasy with eyes unveiled. I see a figure, but not really. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come forth from Jacob."

That star rises with a staff in his hand, the leader, the shepherd that the high priests and the civil authorities tell Herod you will discover if you go to Bethlehem. Out of Bethlehem comes the shepherd leader of God's people. But it has been proclaimed a long time ago through a pagan who prophesied in God's name. So that star coming in the story is a reference to that incident in the book of Numbers and the people of Matthew's community

recognize that, so we're beginning to see, God has come for all, not for a few.

When the people of Matthew's community tried to cope with what Matthew was telling them, they can also begin to understand what happens later in the life of Jesus. This king, this civil ruler and the religious leaders come together and conspire against Jesus. "Go and get the details, and then come back and tell me," and the chief priests go along with that. Herod, of course, wants that only for his own purposes, to destroy this threat to him, as he perceives Jesus.

Jesus is foreseen here as the shepherd leader that he becomes, so the message is clearly about Jesus, who he is and why he has come. This is the message that Matthew is proclaiming to that community of Jewish Christians, trying to get them to move away from the convictions that they've had, to understand God in this much deeper, more profound way, God entering into human history in Jesus, who was born that beautiful night in Bethlehem.

As we try to reflect upon all of this, we can see what the message means for us now. We have to move beyond our strong convictions, for some of us, and the way the Church really understood the mystery, at least in some fashion -- not totally, but some ways -- before we really evolved in this understanding that God came for all and not for just a few, the chosen.

Jerusalem, in Isaiah, was the place where God dwelt. Jerusalem was to be the light of the nations. After Jesus came and he himself in his adult life showed us that he went beyond the chosen people. Think about the outcast, the one the Jews hated. Jesus holds a Samaritan up as the one who really is in touch with God, because that Samaritan understands who is the neighbor, the one in need, and that Samaritan, that outcast, the one the chosen people rejected, is the one who has really understood the mystery of God.

Jesus also showed that when he responded to the woman. Remember that Syro-Phoenician woman? Luke calls her in his gospel "the one who came from outside the promised land," a Gentile, a pagan, and reached out to touch the cloak of Jesus to be healed.

This is a person now who finds God in Jesus. She doesn't become a follower of Jesus -- we don't know that, at least. She probably went back to be with her family, and the Samaritan went on to live his life.

Jesus goes into the home of a Roman centurion, a pagan, a Gentile, and this Gentile also recognizes God in Jesus. He recognizes God when Jesus heals, raises up his young daughter, brings her to life. The centurion has now seen God in Jesus.

So Jesus reaches out to others beyond the chosen people, the elect. Now we who are the disciples of Jesus, not so that we can be saved, but so that we, this community of disciples, now becomes like the city of Jerusalem, the place where God dwells. The place where God is to be a light to the world. That is what the community of disciples is called to be so that all people can recognize God, see God present in our world and our history. God has come into the human race for all peoples, and God's light is to shine especially among those who have chosen to follow Jesus, to be his disciples. That's our church, that's who we are.

I have two examples of how the church is to be a light to all the nations. One is the church, and one of the dioceses of California, where they have just built a magnificent new cathedral and they call it "The Cathedral of Christ the Light," and it dominates a part of that city so that everyone can see it. It's a beautiful structure and at night when it's lighted from within, it becomes a light to the whole area. But it's a building. It symbolizes wealth and power dominating over the city, and I think fails to really communicate the message that God is a shepherd, reaching out, serving, ministering to everyone in Jesus in our midst.

The other example is what happened in El Salvador under Archbishop Romero. The cathedral in that archdiocese was not in ruins, but was certainly in need of much repair, and people were pressing the archbishop to spend resources to repair it. The archbishop said, "No. Those resources must be for the poor. A cathedral isn't where God lives. It's the people where God is present and where God can become the light."

So instead of using resources to put up a building that might show wealth, power and prestige, the archbishop chose to use the resources of the diocese, opening up the seminary, where those who had been driven from their homes and villages because of the civil war could come and find a place to stay, and find the resources they needed to live.

The archbishop continued to preach to the people, "We must be one with the poor and the oppressed," and took the side of the poor. To me, that is a church becoming a light to the nations, to all, and that's what we're called to be. As disciples of Jesus, we should be a church that is filled with the love of Jesus that becomes a light to reach out to the poor, the oppressed, wherever they are -- in our own midst, in other parts of the world where there is so much violence, killing, hatred and oppression. Our church must be this light, to reach out.

And that of course means to this diocese, every diocese, every local church, God is to be present, and God is present, through we have to make that presence manifest and clear, become a real light. Of course that isn't just "the Church," it's you and it's me-that's who it is. We are the church, the individuals, so we bring this down to ourselves. Each of us is the place where God dwells and we must be a light to our brothers and sisters, to our immediate family, to our community, our neighborhood, to our city, to our nation, to our world.

In whatever small way we can, each of us has to be that light so that our whole church becomes a light to all the nations so that message of Jesus can finally be heard, and that message can bring what we all desire, what Isaiah proclaimed so beautifully in his message in our first lesson today, how "the glory of God rises in our midst. Nations come to our light, to the brightness of our dawn. This sight will make all of us radiant, our hearts throbbing when full, all peoples singing in praise of God. That's the promise, that's what can happen when you and I become the light we are called to be and when our church once more really is a light to the nations.

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