

Epiphany Sunday, 7 January 2024

Scriptures: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Homily: Fr. Ken

During the months of December and January, back when I was a doctoral student at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, I would walk to the University in the morning at 9:00: it was pitch dark. I would return from the University at 4:00: it was pitch dark. High in the Northern Hemisphere, we were always hoping for sunlight.

Five thousand years ago, ancient peoples built burial chambers that would be illuminated by the sun on the shortest day of the year, December 21st. The sun shined along a carefully fashioned stone passage and illuminated the entire chamber where human remains had been placed. Whether such building projects originated from the desire for the return of light and warmth of the sun, or was there a primitive understanding of a rebirth and death, we can only speculate. These stone monuments still evoke a sense of wonder and mystery as they are illuminated on the shortest day each year. Looking towards the eastern sky in the morning, it is a great sign of hope when the sky begins to brighten. A modern hymn opens with the words, "Longing for light, we wait in darkness".

The Old Testament history reminds us that the people of Israel waited for the light of a Messiah who would proclaim a new kingdom, and give people a new promise of hope.

Our celebration of the Epiphany this weekend proclaims that Christ is the Messiah, the glory of God, who is like light breaking into the night, and who gives us a new hope and rebirth to the people that walked in darkness.

We come to the crib and look into the manger to see the Christ child lying in the feeding place for the animals. He is our food for life. With childlike wonder we look into the crib and see the kings gathering to worship this child and bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They are gifts of great extravagance fit for a king and God. The gift of myrrh is a sign of suffering and the anointing of the dead, and so a shadow falls over the scene of joy and hope. The fulfillment of the life of this child will be poured out on the cross so that we can have life, with our sins forgiven. The cross stands over this scene of Christmas, and promises hope and rebirth.

Another shadow falls over the scene, as we heard in the Gospel. It is the long shadow reaching from Jerusalem and the court of Herod, who lives in the fear of a new king who will replace him and usurp his throne. Herod's desire to speak to these travelers from the east was not out of curiosity or love but rather full of malicious intent. The recently completed Temple of Herod, glinting in the sun with its golden roof, was one of the wonders of the world, to be admired and wondered at by the many pilgrims to the city of Jerusalem. A child who would be king of the Jews might threaten Herod's power and his corrupt and oppressive reign. From the backwater of Bethlehem there comes a new king and a new shepherd of Israel. The magi worship and adore the Christ child in all his fragility, vulnerability, and innocence. He becomes the new temple before whom we bow down and worship.

After the hectic celebration of Christmas, the feast of the Epiphany helps us to grasp more deeply the gift that has been given to us and the revelation of the Christ child who will save us, and who desires that all people hear his message of hope.

It suggests that we ask ourselves: "What difference does the birth of Christ make to our lives as we resume our regular schedules and as schools reopen for the new semester?"

Pope Francis challenges us to share the joy of the Gospel with people we meet. Maybe we can help a friend to find new meaning because of the celebration of Christmas. Perhaps we may have a new desire to speak of the birth of Christ. Maybe we are more ready to love in a difficult situation. The Epiphany invites us to find a new path and a new route as we begin the new year. The Gospel message calls us to be more open to people who are fragile and vulnerable, weak and poor, and in this way share our hope and joy with others.

-end-