

The Epiphany

- Happy New Year, brothers! This Sunday is the Mass for The Epiphany of the Lord, so I am going to share some thoughts about how we should consider the Epiphany. It comes at the end of the 12 days of the Christmas season, and for us Catholics, it is supposed to prepare us for our involvement throughout the rest of the liturgical year.
- As you may already know, the Epiphany of the Lord comes into our faith through tradition and from three sources within sacred scripture. The most prominent reference is from the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-12) with the story of the Visit of the Magi.
- Matthew tells us the Magi are wise men from the east who traveled from afar following the light of a brilliant star in search of the newborn King of the Jews prophesied to be the long awaited Messiah.
- The other two sources in sacred scripture come from the prophet Isaiah and from King David. Isaiah chapter 60 prophesies that the coming Messiah will be the Glory of New Zion, the King whose radiance the kings of all other nations will walk in. Isaiah foretold that kings from Midian, Ephah, Sheba and Tarshish would come bearing gifts for the Messiah.
- In Psalm 72, King David sings of the Kingdom of the Messiah. He also tells how these kings from foreign lands shall come to bring tribute to the Messiah and all kings from every nation shall pay him homage. These scriptural references reveal Jesus as the King of Kings.
- These stories in the Bible illustrate to us that Jesus was recognized by important people as a king from his birth, and was understood to be the eternal King of Kings. We are told that we also will understand this completely at his second coming.
- But today, both his birth and our anticipation of his second coming seem to be so far removed from the circumstances of our modern times. I fear that too many people only understand his role as King of Kings from a distance; as if viewing a painting, or knowing his kingship only as a legend still to come. Understanding Jesus' kingship is often relegated to a matter of a religious idea only.
- It is a real challenge to see the Epiphany of the Lord any differently than this in our modern times. It is hard to relate to a king as ruler of any nation now. Even for those countries that still have a king; the position is now largely ceremonial.
- In nations ruled by democratic governance, the people have some say in who their national leader will be. It is very difficult today to put any credence in the authority of a king.
- But shouldn't and couldn't the Epiphany of Jesus as King of Kings have a deeper meaning for us than just a distant spiritual hope within our faith system? Yes, I know that it can. But it requires us to think much more deeply about the story of the Magi's Epiphany and to go beyond the common modern English use of the word epiphany.

- Our common use of the word epiphany conveys a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. It conveys an illuminating discovery or a revealing moment.
- Webster's dictionary does also make reference to Christianity's coming of the Magi that first manifested Christ as King of the Jews and all Gentiles. But our understanding needs to be based on something deeper and more personal than these definitions.
- Our deepest understanding won't be a sudden manifestation. But we can lean on the Magi's experience as a starting point. Like the Magi, our understanding will also encompass a long journey; but it will be our own personal journey with Christ.
- My personal perspective has evolved from seeing Jesus as a legend still to come to knowing him personally as the King of all kings. But this wasn't easy or quick—it took a lot of soul searching over the years. In fact, I also had to overcome even simpler personal perceptions of Jesus that I had adopted before becoming a Christian.
- When I accepted during my college years that there must be a God based on the intelligent beauty of his natural creation, I logically classified Jesus as the Master Arborist and Zoologist who designed and created the Beauty of the Earth.
- But soon thereafter, my understanding of Jesus became more of Iconic Protomartyr after piecing together some basic details of Christianity and learning that he allowed himself to be crucified for the sake of saving humanity from what used to be the permanent effects of sin.
- And not long after that, I met and fell in love with Nancy. Her faith, even though immature, was an important aspect of family life for her and her parents. I decided I could accept the inconvenience of being Catholic if it meant I could live my life with her.
- I enrolled in RCIA and learned a little more about Jesus, which allowed my view of him to mature to that of Promised Legend to Come. My knowledge grew a small degree over the next 17 years, but my immature understanding had hit a plateau. I didn't pursue a better understanding of our faith until well into my adulthood.
- Soon after arriving at St. Sylvester in my mid-forties, I encountered mid-life crisis in the form of dissatisfaction with work and life in general. I also knew that my faith lacked integrity, so I turned toward God for help and became a prayerful person. After experiencing personal, contemplative prayer and then learning more about our faith through adult faith formation classes, my understanding of Jesus grew to that of Patient Teacher.
- From there, many doors opened for me and I walked through them. I went on retreats and started receiving spiritual direction. I began seeing myself as I truly was, and there were some aspects of myself I didn't like. Jesus then became for me a Compassionate Friend.
- I stayed at this stage for a while, but continued to slowly transform. My perspective of myself and him gradually changed. When he became for me a Relentless Mentor, I began seeing myself as he desires me to be. I began to better understand his desire for discipleship.

- Eventually there came a time when my militant view of authority changed. His authority comes not, as we might expect, from his position as infinitely powerful and mighty God. Instead his authority comes unexpectedly from his power to truly love those who seem most difficult to love.
- I finally understood that Jesus' authority comes from his ability to humbly give himself away completely. His death on the cross was a complete giving of himself to the Father and to all of humanity. His resurrection was then the next act of his authority, which gives mankind the gift of a supernatural hope for salvation. I now know Jesus as Victorious King.
- Maybe more importantly for me living in these modern times, I see that he also gives himself over to me completely in his willingness to patiently wait for my slow transformation.
 - He gives his enduring love to me in forgiveness of my countless transgressions.
 - He faithfully waits through my many periods of distraction from him.
 - He endures my ego until my compassion and meekness are coaxed forward.
- God doesn't give himself authority to unilaterally change a person's nature. He only gives himself authority to love unconditionally and to generously pour out his love on those he hopes will be transformed by it.
- Who else in this world could ever successfully rule a kingdom this way? Only Jesus can reign this way and this is why he is the King of Kings.
- So you may ask, has coming to know Jesus as the King of Kings made a difference for me? It has made all the difference. I am no longer overly troubled about the state of our politically divided, wasteful government; or the hedonistic mass consumerism of our culture; or the depravity of immoral entertainment; or any other grave matter of our times.
- These issues are still there; I am still concerned about them, but I don't let them steal my joy. I still have to contend with these concerns, but I don't spend nearly as much time fretting over these things as I used to.
- My time is better spent living a joyful life and engaging with people in positive ways. I am better poised to live a life consistent with our Catholic values.
- This is what we are all called to do—avoid negativity and create positivity. So what can that look like in our day-to-day living?
 - First and foremost, we should encounter every person like they are the only person that matters in that moment, and we should always share our joys of life with them.
 - We should avoid pointless, joy-stealing discussions about the looming political campaigns. Instead, we should become informed on the issues and share only the facts with the uninformed people we meet. We don't need to highlight the negative character traits of the candidates; those will speak for themselves.

- We shouldn't fret over the general decline of moral values in our world; instead we should only engage in particular situations where our voice and the strength of our life style can demonstrate to another that they can be saved from making poor choices.
 - We shouldn't buy the latest thing just because we can. Instead we should make do with what we already have that still functions and focus excess resources on the needy.
 - We should spend our time deepening our friendships, appreciating the natural and cultural resources of our beautiful country, and growing in intimacy with Jesus.
 - There are countless ways we can live above the negativity of this world. All we need to do is look for and stay on the path of life illuminated by our Teacher, Friend, and Mentor, the King of Kings.
- Now, please pardon the preachy-ness of my advice on what we should and shouldn't do. I will be the first to admit that I often fail in heeding my own advice. That is also why I still see Jesus as Teacher, Friend, and Mentor in addition to being our King. I will always need his help and yours with being reminded about what is most important.
 - The bottom line for all of us is that we need to maintain an eternal focus and not get too caught up in concerns with what will happen to this world during the last 20 to 30 years that most of us likely have left in it. At best, we can only positively impact our own little corner of this world in the time we have left in it.
 - We need to be purposeful in educating and supporting the generations of Christians coming after us. We are called to give hope, bring joy, and share love with all who will carry the light of truth forward after we have left this world for our permanent home.
 - So brothers, the only New Year resolution we need to make is to share our personal Epiphany of the Lord with those in our little corner of the world by living a joyous life. This is the true coming of the King of Kings in our lifetime!

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett