

EPIPHANY 2010 ABC YEAR C

(Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2: 1-12)

THE BABE OF BETHLEHEM IS OUR TEACHER

When I was in college at Ohio State, I worked at the Big Bear supermarket that used to be at Fourth and High Street in Columbus. (Remember Big Bear?) Fourth and High is now in what is called the Short North. Before it was gentrified, however, this area was a tough neighborhood where there were, among other things, some racial tensions. One day when I was working in the produce section, I was weighing bananas and I turned around and there were two toddlers, one white and one African American hugging the heck out of each other. The woman whose fruit I was weighing said something like: "If only we adults could learn from the kids."

The Babe of Bethlehem teaches us; and his example reminds us how much we have to learn from him and all God's little ones – whether kids or adults with special needs or just the humble of the earth. Certainly the Magi were open to the lessons the Christ Child taught them – or at least this is how I would interpret their amazing visit. Jesus taught them and us that he came for everyone, Gentiles included, and that his appearance or Epiphany on this earth manifests God's deep and abiding love for everyone. Surely these exotic visitors also went away from Bethlehem filled with the reality of the God who revels in the beauty of simplicity and who calls us to humility – to the littleness that the scene in the stable symbolizes.

One of my favorite modern philosophers is a man named Jean Vanier. He was born in 1928 into a prominent French-Canadian family and he had every advantage growing up. During World War II, he served in the Canadian Navy. After the war, he earned a Ph. D. and began a college teaching career in Toronto. But in 1964 he switched gears and founded a home in France for two developmentally disabled men because of his conviction that such folks had much to teach people in the so-called "mainstream." This led eventually to the founding of many more such homes –over 130 to date in 30 countries on every continent. Jean Vanier's movement is known as L'Arche (or the Ark in English, after Noah's Ark), a name he gave it because of his conviction that community is the key to learning how to be holy. Always a devoted Catholic, Vanier won praise from Pope John Paul II who said of L'Arche: "[It is a] dynamic and providential sign of the civilization of love." Jean Vanier is often compared to Blessed Mother Theresa whom he knew quite well. His philosophy is known as the wisdom of tenderness. Because of his insights and energy, countless people who would have been stuck away in institutions are now living fruitful and happy lives and interacting with each other and with those who care for them in these homes – these Arks.

Vanier is convinced that the developmentally disabled have much to teach those who are not disabled. In fact, everyone has much to learn from everyone else in the human community. He describes his way of thinking in words like these: For me the challenge is to love reality and not to live in the what could have been or what should have been, but to embrace what is and to find God present there. I believe that this philosophy perfectly fits with the reality of Bethlehem where the shepherds and the Magi discovered and took away with them the most basic lesson of Christianity and indeed of humanity –

namely, God loves us beyond anything we can imagine. I also believe that, as the great saints, have taught us, it is only in simplicity and humility that our hearts can have the openness to God that we need to learn about him and the destiny of the human family.

For Jean Vanier, it is a question of balance. We can be too sophisticated, too concerned about our careers, too caught up in the fast pace of life, and too eager to stand out socially. He uses the example of a Dad who has knocked himself out all day at his profession or his trade or his job. When he comes home, he may have the opportunity (if he takes it) to get down on the floor and play with his kids. The Dad learns from them what is most important, something that maybe he cannot even articulate, and this provides balance to his life in which, incidentally, he teaches his children some great lessons too as they grow up. It is this balance that the Magi experienced when they shared their wonderful and expensive gifts with the Christ Child who gave them hope and peace and life in return.

I found myself thinking of Jean Vanier's insights as I was driving home from the Community Kitchen of our sister parish of Holy Rosary/St. John on Christmas Eve of this year. This is the place where hundreds of God's little ones who are poor receive the benefit of your generosity every year as the result of the gifts you have left under the Jesse tree – and, by the way, it is always beautiful to me that those who tend to the tags on that tree can hardly keep up with your demand for them. At Holy Rosary/St. John, the folks who stream there on Christmas Eve are first treated to a fabulous dinner. Then they get in line for Christmas gifts provided by you, the parishioners of St. Paul. The volunteers both in the kitchen and in the gift-giving operation are a veritable army of families and young people from our Westerville Catholic community. Everything is well ordered and it really is a beautiful experience.

But while I was there, I couldn't help thinking about the injustice that lies behind so much (not all, but so much) of the want in that neighborhood on the near east side of Columbus. Why can't our country and the world get its act together and achieve a more equitable sharing of resources? Now I do not believe this is a bad thought. In fact, this is a very Catholic thought. After all, Pope Paul VI said: "If you want peace, work for justice." And there is a place for doing all we can to bring about a more just and peaceful country and world. But there is also a place for the marvelous scenes on Christmas Eve and Christmas and on other days throughout the year when Christians and others of good will simply serve the poor and do what they can to help them in a realistic way. So I thought about what Vanier said as I was driving home. It is so important not to let what could or should have been to get in the way of finding God in the concrete reality of our time and place.

The Babe of Bethlehem broke into the concrete reality of our lives and it was this down-to-earth child whom the important visitors from the East encountered and from whom they learned. Jean Vanier tells of a disabled young man who came into the room where Vanier was meeting with a visitor at one of the Arks. The young man simply went over to Vanier and, with face all smiles, placed his hands on Vanier's head and then walked out. "How sad," the visitor said. But Vanier later commented that this gentleman was unable to appreciate how truly happy this young man was.

May we appreciate the happiness that the baby Jesus came to bring us and to teach us – which is the happiness of the Magi and of the toddlers who hugged at the Big Bear Store! And may we be prepared

at all times to learn the lesson of how to be really happy from the Christ who lives in each other and especially from the Babe of Bethlehem who lives in the children and their like in our world!