

HOMILY FOR EPIPHANY 2010

“Your sons and your daughters come from afar.” “Magi came from the east.” “Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body.” “Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.” In various ways our readings today have made it clear that God wants all people to share life with him. And we must believe that if all people really knew who God is, they would want to share life with him. He is the light that shatters the darkness of evil, suffering and death. He is the light that enables us to grow to our full stature as human beings.

Often I have seen plants and even large trees bending in the direction where they will be able to bask in the light that will enable them to be most fully alive. They know by the very biological processes that make them what they are that they must turn to the light. And I believe that human beings are made to respond in a similar way to the God who is light itself. Yet sometimes we are covered over by sin and deception and can no longer respond to the light. And so we shrivel up inside like plants that are kept in dark places and cannot move toward the light.

But in these days of Christmas we celebrate that because so many people were in darkness and could not move toward the light, the light has moved toward us. The divine light that caused human life to spring up in the first place, the light that has always nurtured people when they turned toward him, the light that is the source and sustenance of the life that every living being craves – this light has been manifested in a wondrous way in the birth of Jesus. In the past several days thousands of us have gathered here, drawn by the light so beautifully manifested in the birth of Christ.

Now some who did not gather with us might ask, “If Christ, the light, is so wonderful, then why hasn’t the whole world turned to him?” Well, today’s gospel presents one reason why more of the world’s people haven’t turned to the light. Remember how the magi came from the East because they had seen the star signaling a great king’s birth. They stopped in Jerusalem to inquire about this. Herod had a good idea what they were seeking. He knew of the prophecies of the messiah’s coming. He even called scripture scholars in to find out exactly what the scriptures had to say about this. And they told him. The messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

So Herod sent the magi off to Bethlehem to find this child. But nobody among the Jews, especially Herod, told them anything about the one they were seeking. While the magi went to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews, no one told them that they were seeking the One who was born to be a light to the nations, who was born to be their king as well. So after paying homage, the magi simply returned home, never to be heard from again. While the prophet Isaiah had said of the people of Jerusalem that the nations were to walk by their light, they had failed to bear witness to that light. And so the nations remained in darkness.

A very sad truth that we Christians must face is that one of the main reasons so many people have not recognized that the light of God has broken into the world in the coming of Christ is that his representatives haven’t represented him very well. And this is something we need to hear. For we have gathered here as people of the light, whose calling it is to bear witness to him, to reach into people’s lives with the good news that the One who will help them grow to full and everlasting life has come and is here for them.

This is our calling. And the world knows that this is our calling. Every person who bears the name Christian, who bears the name of Christ is automatically his representative. This isn’t something that one chooses in addition to becoming a Christian any more than representing one’s country is an additional choice one makes when enlisting in the service. For being a Christian means that we follow Christ. And if we really do this we will direct people to the light.

Yet a truth we all know is that many of us who bear the name Christian do not follow Christ very well. And as a result people are actually turned away from Christ rather than turned toward him. It’s true, isn’t it, that many people have done terrible things while proclaiming their faith in Jesus. People have actually attributed their prejudices, acts of exclusion and violence, lack of civility, and condescending behaviors to their being Christians. And who can blame anyone who has witnessed such

things first hand from concluding that there is some darkness to following Christ that isn't the least bit attractive.

The publicity for the movie *Invictus*, which has to do with Nelson Mandela's attempt to overcome racial prejudices among Christians in South Africa, reminded me of a story I once heard about Mahatma Gandhi's experience there. It seems that Gandhi was strongly attracted to Christianity from his reading of the gospels. In fact, as a young man in South Africa, he seriously considered becoming a Christian. So he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to worship, a white South African elder met him outside the door and wouldn't let him enter. "Where do you think *you* are going?" the man asked Gandhi. When Gandhi said that he would like to attend worship there the elder replied, "There's no room for coloreds in this church. Get out of her or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps." From that moment on, Gandhi lost all interest in becoming a Christian.

Years later, when the great evangelist E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?" To this Gandhi replied that it was because so many Christians are so unlike the Christ he found in the scriptures. But while Gandhi was wise enough to distinguish between Christ and those who call themselves Christians, many are not. So many in our world will have nothing at all to do with Christ because of what they have heard Christians say or seen them do.

I know that often I have heard people say that they stopped coming to church because of the mean-spirited words or actions of those they saw at worship when they encountered them somewhere out in the community. Of course, this isn't right. We can't blame Christ for the faults of his followers. But it is understandable. The hypocrisy of Christians is a terrible thing because it does turn people away from following Christ. After all, upon seeing the hurtful actions of churchgoers, it is hard not to conclude that following Christ really doesn't make the profound difference in people's lives that we claim it does. And I know that this is just as much the affect of my own hypocrisies as it is of anyone else's. It is sad to think that those of us who gather here are the very ones who keep people from seeing the light of Christ rather than drawing them to it. But sometimes it is true.

So as we begin this New Year we would do well to take a good look at our lives to see what it is about them that undermines our witness to the One who is the light for all people. Then a good new year's resolution would be to work on replacing those attitudes and behaviors with ones that will show others what a wonderful thing following Christ really is.

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