

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jan 6th 2013

Secrets are exciting and when one is shared with us, that energy changes to intimacy and a sense of being special. When the information becomes public and generally known, that specialness is dimmed.

Israel had a long history of being intimate and special through the covenants made by God. They were not exactly secrets, but the “One God” was sharing with this one nation, information, or revelation of Who this “One God” was. Their history was a continuous intensification of their own image and the image of God for them. They were promised a Messiah and in the past weeks, we have heard of the miracles and fruitfulness which would accompany His arrival.

What we hear into day’s First Reading is a prophecy which foretells that this Messiah, this kind of secret, is going to be shared beyond the borders of Israel. The nation will still be special because people from the sea to the desert will come to visit the glory of God manifested in Jerusalem and Israel. The riches of other lands will come in recognition of the presence of a new brilliance which has shined upon this little place or spot of the earth. This, along with other prophecies, moves the secret more outward making the whole world bright and enlightened by the Light of this new revelation. God claims all people as special and as belonging to this “One God”.

Today’s Gospel is unique to Matthew who presents Jesus as both the One Who is to come and the One who has come for all. The Magi represent the “beyond” or distant lands and peoples to whom the Christ will offer His universal wisdom.

These “Wise Men” also represent the former ways of thinking, wondering, and philosophizing. They come in a sign of surrender to this new “epiphany” or display of this “One God” Who is for all and is now known as the God Who does the seeking and the finding. The Magi are the figures of the world who did the seeking for and the finding of God. The Light is initiated by God and this Light is meant for the whole world.

As with the shepherds, these wise men continue in a liturgical manner. They arrive, having wandered in faith, have an offertory procession, a time of adoration and then a sending. Were they totally satisfied by the whole experience of stars, warnings, findings? They were somehow missioned by the encounter to go farther and further and deeper. Like the shepherds they were changed and yet returned to the desert-usual of life.

The gifts which the Magi had presented represented what had been valuable to these seekers who left them at the “house” and leave by “another way”. They have not so much found as they have been found and leave that place to begin spreading the news of the Finder they found. This is all a grand ending and beginning. The Magi-story is the revelation that mere human wisdom searches for more than it can understand. The Wanderers, who have come from afar in distance and time, arrive, not at an idea or principle, but at the mystery of a Person. They are we as well.

We would like to think of God, arrive at our own logical, reasonable concept of God. We would love to say that we have found God. If we determine Who and What God is, then we would seem to control God. God would have to act accordingly. In prostrating themselves, the Magi admit their former human arrogance and surrender to the truth that until then, they had not been satisfied with the conclusions of their personal ponderings.

The Epiphany is a grand revelation that God will not be found to satisfy human thinking. This seeking of us by God encourages us to live with the dissatisfactions of our hearts. Jesus has come among us and within us to accompany our spirits and not merely slake the thirsts of thought. We are invited to lay down our intellects, as precious gold, which they are. We, like the Magi, pick up our lives which have been met, found and sent off, the better for the finding.

It can be assumed that, as with the shepherds before them, the Magi went back by “another way”, not merely geographically. They return to a new and different way of relating with life. Their hearts and spirits are comforted and their minds still turning these things over in wonder, not a bad way to journey. The seeking is God’s labor, the being found is ours. For us finding is less lively than seeking. When we hear that we should seek and we shall find, what Jesus and the Magi teach us is that human finding will always lead to some kind of dissatisfaction and so the seeking re-begins.

The Magi did not stay at the place to which the star guided them. Nobody who came to find Jesus, from the shepherds to those seeking Him within the tomb, were ever allowed just to stay nice and close to Him, the finder. He moved them along in their human-heart search. This too is not a bad, but rather holy way to journey.

I have on my desk a humorous Christmas card with the Three Wise Men walking with their gifts in their arms. The caption reads, “You brought gold! I thought there was a fifteen-dollar limit.” I wonder what kind of ego-involvement there was within these three wanderers/wonderers. What was in it for

them personally? Did they love the finding of truths purely for the finding? Were they searching for a wisdom that would satisfy them and they would never have to leave home again or never have to ponder stars?

Jesus is not the reward for those who can figure Him out by deep thinking. There are those whose deep thinking stumbles over the manger and all it means. They are humbled by their not being able to figure it all out and so they go back by the same way they came. When they find something which satisfies their intellects, they will feel good egotistically about themselves, even if what they find is that there never was a manger, stars, a Baby wrapped in the love of the Creator of mangers.

We do not satisfy our egos by ultimately finding Jesus as an answer, but we find ourselves humbled by being found not as an answer, but a way to live with our wonderings. There is no fifteen dollar limit to our surrendering the total control of the wealth of our minds, imaginations and egos.

“We have seen his star in the east, and we have come with gifts to adore the Lord.” Matt. 2, 2

Larry Gillick, S.J.