

Homily for 2 Christmas
January 2, 2022
S. Stephens', Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Greetings on this Second Sunday after Christmas,

as we prepare to wrap up the 12 Days of Christmas on Wednesday night,
and celebrate The Epiphany on Thursday.

The Lectionary gives us the option to have the Visit of the Wise Men
as our Gospel reading this Sunday,

so even though it's not yet Epiphany,

we get to have our cake and eat it too.

The Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the Wise Men,

or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles – the non-Jews:

the appearance and validation of this Savior

who is not just for the lost sheep of Israel, but for the world.

It would seem the Epiphany has waned in significance among Anglicans
and many mainstream Protestant churches.

However, in many Hispanic and Catholic countries,

the Day of the Three Kings is a significant holiday.

Even more interesting is how the Epiphany is a much more significant and robust celebration in the Eastern Orthodox Churches than Christmas! Tides seem to be turning, however, and in recent years, the tradition of blessing chalk for marking the doors of homes with the initials of the three Wise Men and the number of the new year seems to be gaining popularity once more.

I invite you to take a piece of chalk home with you today and mark the lintel of your own door at home with the blessing which you'll find in your parish notes insert.

There are three things I find we can take away this morning as we contemplate the visit of the Wise Men to our Infant Lord.

The first is this:

the Wise Men were serious seekers.

No one sets out on that kind of journey unless one is very serious about seeking after God.

The Wise Men in many ways serve as a prototype for all Christians,

and for all who will become Christians from every conceivable background.

These men are not from the House of Israel, which of course is the point.

The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled:

Nations shall stream to your light,
and Kings to the brightness of your dawning.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

The prophecy of the Psalmist is likewise fulfilled:

The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute,
and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.

But more importantly than all that,

they are seeking after God,

which is truly the definition of the whole Christian experience.

We seek after God because once we have discovered

that we will only find complete happiness and the fullest meaning

of our lives

by knowing God and desiring to know him more fully.

Of course, the great paradox of seeking after God and finding him,

is that in finding him we ourselves are found.

We discover in that moment of being found
that it was not we that were seeking after God,
but God seeking after us.

Our seeking is merely the response of our heart and soul
to God's seeking and longing.

As St. John tells us,

“We love him because he first loved us.”

Surely the three Wise Men had that profound epiphany or realization
when they fell on their knees before the Infant Jesus.

After journeying for years, and looking up to the night sky for their guide,
they meet God face to face on the ground.

Such is the reward for people who seek seriously after God.

The second thing we may take away from the Visit of the Wise Men
is that they were profoundly and utterly changed by their encounter.

Much has been made by preachers

over the detail that the Wise Men left for their own countries
by another road.

They cannot go back the way they came,

because their encounter with the Living God
who will for ever alter the history of time and salvation
has profoundly changed them.

How could it not?

We may likewise take away that our spiritual encounters with Christ,
the Living God,
must likewise change us.

We cannot go back to the old ways of living and doing things
once we have experienced the grace and love of Jesus in our lives.

We cannot come to this altar rail week after week,
where we experience the Living God in our midst,
even experience his touch in our very hands,
and go unchanged.

We are called to be transformed by our encounters with God.

We too are called to leave by a different road.

Of course,

there is a very real and literal reason for the three wise men
to leave by another road:

for they are warned by an angel in a dream to avoid Herod,
whose intentions around finding the Christ child
are soaked in barbarous and unthinkable murderous evil.

That brings me to the third and final point we may take away,
which is that the forces of evil will always seek to destroy good,
but that love and truth will always triumph over wrong.

There will always be those who, like Herod,
will do anything, absolutely anything,
to maintain their grip on power.

They worship the false idols of greed and wealth,
and their hearts become hardened and immune
to the plights of the poor and oppressed,
and deaf to the sound of God's voice and message of self-offering love.

They have failed to seek seriously after God.

But as the witness of Scripture
and of Jesus's own life, death, and resurrection attest:

God's Truth always prevails,
and Love overcomes every wrong.

Herod does all he can to secure his grip on power,

but ultimately, he fails.

His attempt to manipulate the Wise Men and coopt their righteous search

as a way to succeed in his own perverse search fails,

because those who seek seriously after God

will always discern rightly those who are not searching for God.

I say this not because our job as Christians or as humans

is to cast judgment upon others,

or to even create an “other-ness”

that gives way to an “us” and “them” mentality.

Rather, I say this as a reminder to all of us

that bad men, corrupt regimes, and forces which seek to deny

the fullness of God’s image in each of us

will always fail.

We have been reminded of this in the past week

as the world mourns the passing of Archbishop Desmond Tutu,

and celebrates and reflects on the heroic witness he provided

in the face of apartheid in South Africa,

helping to bring about its downfall.

His was a witness grounded not just in a secular concept of human rights,
but of Christian witness,
informed by a rich, Anglo-Catholic sacramental life.

Desmond Tutu was a serious seeker after God,
and once he had encountered him,
his life could never be the same.

Desmond discovered just how much he was loved by God,
and was able to love himself as a result.

He loved himself so much that he made it possible
for others to realize that they too
might love themselves as much as God loved them.

May we all experience that joy – may we all experience that profound peace
that comes when we encounter the object of our seeking,
the Love of God made manifest.

Let our prayer be that of St. Anselm's in the 1100s,

“O God, let me seek you in desiring you and desire you in seeking you,
find you in loving you and love you in finding you.”

May we all, like those first Wise Men, be serious seekers. Amen.