

As I drive through the neighborhoods around the parish, I see that a number of families have taken down the Christmas lights which adorned the front of their houses. Live Christmas trees now sit by the curb waiting to be picked up. I even saw an artificial tree and a yard decoration laying there (it may have been Bumble from the old, animated Christmas special “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer”). Fortunately for some and unfortunately for others, school starts tomorrow. We seem to be done with Christmas.

But the Church isn’t finished teaching us about this great event. Today we celebrate the Epiphany situated still within the Christmas Season. “Epiphany” means manifestation. There are three “epiphanies” our Church celebrates, but we focus today on the epiphany where the three Wise Men from far off lands visit the Holy Family. The first thing these Wise Men teach us is how to connect with God. Despite not practicing the Jewish faith, they are schooled in the essence of Judaism. They are also knowledgeable about various sciences. From their knowledge of planetary sciences and the Jewish teachings of the Law and the Prophets, they discern that a newborn King of the Jews is now present among the people. All this reminds us that God reveals himself, not just in matters of faith, but in the world around us. Since God created the earth and the universe in which we find ourselves, it is only natural that his handprint is upon everything. We should be able to recognize him, not just in church, but in everything that surrounds us. That is also why we Catholics are called to be stewards and protectors of the earth, since we firmly believe that it was created by God and handed on to us for

safekeeping – not only in our time but for those who will follow us for generations to come.

King Herod was troubled by his conversation with the Wise Men. Since one of Herod's titles was "king of the Jews" he would have been disturbed that a "rival" king had now appeared on the scene. We know what his anger and jealousy led to. He called for the killing of ALL males under the age of two in an attempt to eliminate any possible rival.

Presumably, Herod would have been troubled since he was caught flat-footed by the message of the Wise Men. After all, he had available to him similar wise men in Jerusalem who were schooled in the Jewish faith and the planetary sciences. This second group of wise men either failed to see the signs of the birth of the new King of the Jews or fear prevented them from mentioning anything about this birth to their boss, King Herod, because they worried about his retribution or a loss of status among those of his kingly court.

Unlike those of Herod's court who ignored the signs of the birth of this new king, we are to look at the signs among us and see how God is constantly revealing himself to us. Certainly, God is present here at Mass and in his sacraments. But Christ is also present when I meet someone with a deep faith who is in the hospital. That deep faith is what enables that patient to state how Christ stands with them even in their time of suffering. Christ is present at a baptism, but he is also present in the love that a husband and wife have for each other. Christ reveals himself in his words found in the scriptures, but he is also present in the

things around us that were created as he, the Father, and the Spirit spoke the words which brought those things into being.

This feast reminds us to be attentive to Christ present around us – in a variety of things and people. May we be attuned to his presence among us and praise him for the blessing those things and people are to us.

Speaking of presence (P-R-E-S-E-N-C-E), let me say a word about the presents (P-R-E-S-E-N-T-S) which the Wise Men brought to the Holy Family. Personally, I'm not a great gift giver. I usually default to giving gift cards, but perhaps you're one of those people who gives the perfect gift. When folks open your gift it truly is something that is perfect for them.

The Wise Men from the east gave perfect gifts to Christ. The gold acknowledges that Christ is King – worthy of the finest things. The frankincense reminds us of Christ's divinity. Like incense which rises to the heavens, Christ is fully divine as well as fully human. Christ seeks to join us to his divinity as we worship, pray, and serve others. Finally myrrh, an expensive, fragrant oil normally used to anoint the dead, reminds us that Christ will give his life for us. It also reminds us that we are to unite ourselves with Christ – in particular, by dying to what is sinful. When we do that, Christ assures us that we are united with him in his resurrection.

The gift we give to Christ is more precious than gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is the gift of self that Christ wishes to receive from us. When we give ourselves to Christ, he blesses us, transforms us, and draws us to himself. But more than any

gift we give to Christ, the most important gift is the gift of Christ himself which he gives to us. While gifts given at Christmas will at some point wear out, break, or become obsolete, the gift of Christ himself is perfect – eternal, life-giving, and life-changing.

One final point. Most of us find it endearing to reflect on the Wise Men who traveled many miles from foreign lands to adore the newborn Christ. These men were probably scholars, scientists, and philosophers. Their clothing, languages, customs, and world views were very different from those of the locals in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Nevertheless, they were welcomed by Mary and Joseph. They are an essential part of our Christmas story. They share with us, even to this very day, an epiphany / a manifestation about who and what Jesus is. Their generosity reminds us to share our talents and our treasures with others for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom. In a day and age where we are mostly leery of those outside of our cultural purview, the Wise Men challenge us to broaden our world view and open our minds and hearts to what others, who are different from us, might teach us in the name of Christ.

Just a thought...

Amen? Amen!