

Scripture Reflections

A reflection on the readings for January 7, 2024 — The Epiphany of the Lord

The Epiphany: His Divinity, Our Humanity

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I (Father S. Joseph) took this picture of the sunrise on December 21, winter solstice of 2023. The brilliant glowing light of the sun gradually dispelled the darkness of that longest night of the year. Some claim that the choice of December 25 as Christmas Day has to do with the winter solstice. The gradual increase of daylight beginning with the winter solstice is symbolic of the coming of Christ. It connects us with the first reading from Isaiah:

*“Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory” (Is 60:1-3).*

On the Feast of the Epiphany, I invite you to reflect with me on the Epiphany of Jesus as the Light.

The Light has Come!

Often, we get so lost in the glamor of Christmas celebrations that we forget that the incarnation was necessitated by sin. What makes the winter solstice sunrise indispensable is the long dark night. Similarly, if sin and darkness had not destroyed humanity and put human destiny in peril, it would not be necessary for Christ to come. Jesus came to save us.

The story of the magi and Herod and their response to the birth of Jesus portrays a great interplay between the themes of light and darkness. The magi saw the light of a star and were willing to be led by its light. That light of the star led them to the Light of world, Jesus Christ. They recognized the epiphany! They saw the Light! They did him homage!

Herod, on the other hand, epitomizes darkness. He is a prisoner of his own fears, his own insecurities, his own quest for power and dominance. He is crippled by his own inadequacies. He is so blinded by the darkness within that he neither sees the light of the star nor the Light of Jesus Christ. Herod missed the epiphany! He embraced the darkness. He plotted to destroy the child.

Light has Overcome the Darkness

Epiphany means manifestation. In the Tradition of the church, the epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ to the nations. Jesus came not only to save Israel but humanity. At the Epiphany, humanity sees and recognizes its Savior. Christ has come. God has become human.

Today, I would like to draw our attention to yet another aspect of the Epiphany of Jesus – that the Son of God took on human flesh to manifest, to reveal, to make known, what it means to be human. Jesus is the epitome of humanity. Jesus is the face of humanity in its glory. In other words, the Epiphany is also the revelation of the true image, the true worth, the true dignity, the true potential, and the eternal destiny of the human race.

I believe, this too is the light that has come. This too is the glory that shines upon us. On the one hand Epiphany is the revelation of Christ to the nations. On the other hand, Epiphany is also the revelation of true humanity to the human race.

People of Light

There are many ways to describe the massacre that Herod unleashed. On the one hand Herod rejected the Messiah. But Herod's massacre also shows his inhumanity. He is human in precisely the wrong way in which humans can live their humanity. He inquires but his motives are evil. He pretends he wants to do homage to Christ, but he lies. He interprets the magi's return as betrayal. He is the worst of humanity.

And then, there are the magi. They too were kings, like Herod. But they respond differently to the same event. They embrace the light. They offer gifts. They do homage. They find themselves in him. In him and through him, their humanity is sanctified.

The interplay between light and darkness, between good and evil, between humanity and inhumanity continue in our times. Even in our times, there are the magi and there are the Herods of the world. On one side, there is a lot of faith, love, goodness, light, and mutual respect in the world. But the violence, the wars, the lies, the inequalities, and the hate also points to real people who unleash darkness on the world for their own selfish goals.

The winter solstice, the incarnation, and the feast of the Epiphany should help us to reflect on our own life-journey. We can journey through life living in the light, like the magi. We can also journey through life living in darkness, like Herod. Often, we are a combination of both. There are areas in our lives where light prevails and perhaps, there are areas where there are still traces of darkness. The feast of the Epiphany is an invitation to follow the Star. Epiphany invites us to look at Jesus, the Light. Epiphany invites us to allow Jesus, the Light, to set us free from the darkness within and without. Epiphany is an invitation to be people of the light.

The Light of the World is present on the altar at Mass. This is our Epiphany. Indeed, our light has come. Let us too do homage. And in the bread and wine, let us offer the Lord Jesus our lives today and forever.

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