

“They were overjoyed at seeing the star... prostrated themselves and did the child homage”

(Mt 2:10...11)

In the US, Christmas is a much bigger deal than the Epiphany. But elsewhere, it's almost the opposite. In Spain and Latin America, today, not Christmas, is the day that kids get their season's gifts from the Wise Men. Today in Italy, an ugly but friendly witch called “la Befana” brings children candy. Today, France, Quebec, and Louisiana, have a special festive dessert called a “king cake”, with a little clay figure hidden in it to draw the king or queen.

But why should the Epiphany be such a big deal for us as Christians? What do we celebrate today? Why is it real good news for us?

Let's imagine a little New England town in the 1930s. Everyone is some kind of Protestant or Catholic. Everyone, more or less, goes to church on Sunday, although very few are really excited about their religion. And then, for some scientific congress at the college nearby, some scientists from India move into town for a few months. Everybody pretends to ignore them, except the kids who are excited and scared at once. Turns out these science folks are Hindus. They don't go to church; they have their own prayer service at home. Some of the older ladies go around town whispering in horrified tones that the Indians dabble in “idol-worship”. But one day, these very same heathens show up for Mass at Saint Mary's with a big smile. They try and sing the hymns like everyone else. They don't come up for communion, but they kneel in silence during Mass, and oftentimes after Mass, too. When they're not at work, you can often find them in church now, worshipping silently. And that makes the usual parishioners a little ashamed of their own lukewarm faith. Soon, daily Mass is filling up and the line at the confessional gets a little longer too. The pastor is really glad. Turns out these heathens have worked a little miracle: their spirit of adoration has made the hitherto halfhearted townsfolk keener, merrier and more dedicated about their old Christian faith.

Brothers and sisters, this story is like what happened at the Epiphany. The wise men came to Bethlehem from afar, following a mere star. And when it “stopped over a house where a child was, they were overjoyed, and entering the house, saw the Child Jesus with his mother, and prostrated themselves and did him homage”. These pagans who probably knew next to nothing about the great Jewish hope for a Messiah watched a mere little star, and beat most Jews to the manger. Actually, the only Jews who had been there before them to worship the child were the shepherds, that is to say, social outcasts, those whom proper Jews avoided and rejected as ignorant and unclean. By contrast, the wise men's joy, zeal, and science testified to the unique nature of Jesus. Their own brand of faith testified that here was a fragile human being all worthy of divine worship and receiving precious gifts.

Why is this good news for us, brothers and sisters? Well, I bet that each one of us here has, so to speak, an inner pagan inside, waiting to be converted, and waiting to convert the lukewarm religious who also lives inside us. What do I mean?

The first word out of Jesus's mouth when he started preaching was "Return to God!" And each and every one of us has to listen to that call at every moment of our lives. "Return to God!" Or as the Christmas hymn goes, "O come, let us adore him!" There is always a part of us that is waiting to be converted, because the Gospel hasn't reached it yet. That's the inner pagan who lives inside each of us. And there's another character in us in need of conversion too: the halfhearted Christian. The part that drags us physically to Mass but doesn't really listen or focus on what's going on. That part is like a lot of the Jews who lived in Jesus's time. They tithed, they prayed, they did what the Law said they had to do, but they weren't really excited about it. I bet we all have a part like that in us, too. It's kind of chug-chugging along the tracks of the Christian life, but without much fervor or real joy.

The good news is that the pagan part in us might be more excited about converting to God, about worshipping Jesus, than our halfhearted Christian part. This is great news, brothers and sisters: with the grace of God, we can rely on our inner pagan to be a great convert, and to joyfully share with our inner lukewarm Christian a new, burning love for God.

The Epiphany of the Lord is good news for us today because it means that we can always grow in our love and appreciation for God. We just have to look for the signs that God leaves around us, just like He did with the star for the wise men.

So I'll leave you with two questions for this coming week, to think about and pray on: What could be my lucky star in bringing me back to Jesus? And what is the dark part in me that hasn't really listened to the Gospel yet, but is in dire need of conversion? Whether it's an addiction, a habitual sin, a part of me that was deeply hurt and then shut down, the light from the star in Bethlehem can lead that dark place in me to the light of salvation. What is that dark part within me and which twinkling little star is coaxing it gently back to the light?

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