

Reflection for January, 2022

Theme: The Feast of Epiphany

Scripture for Reflection: Matthew chapter 2: 1-12

20+C+M+B+22 Little Adele waited patiently for her teacher to finish her class, before inching towards the blackboard. “Do you have something you want to ask me, child?” “Yes, Miss” Adele responded rather feebly. “Go ahead, then.” “Miss, may I take a piece of chalk with me?” Miss Rozario gave her a puzzling look before making her voice sound very strict and said, “Adele do you have something to ask me concerning Rational Numbers?” “No Miss”. “Then please go back to your seat.” “Please, Miss...” Adele’s voice trailed off, her eyes looked imploringly at Miss Rozario. “You children finish my chalk by drawing on the board and making grids for hopscotch” “No Miss, it isn’t for any game.” “Then what is it for? Don’t tell me you are eating chalk!” “No, Miss!” Adele shot back, vehemently denying the accusation.

“Then what do you want it for?”

“To get it blessed by Fr Peter”.

Miss Rozario had never been more baffled before but in her eight-year career as a teacher she had grown to know that sometimes the stories of a ten-year-old are more difficult to understand than Arithmetic. It seemed so much easier to give her a piece of chalk than to probe any further. She was about to give her the one she had been using when something prompted her to give her a new one. She reached for her drawer where a box of unused chalk sat in neat little rows.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you, Miss” Adele’s eyes glistened with joy as she took the chalk from Miss Rozario.

As soon as class was dismissed, Adele ran to the school chaplain, and begged him to bless her chalk. Fr Peter looked at her quizzically. “A chalk? Child why do you want me to bless a piece of chalk?”

“To write this on the door of my house...”, Adele sheepishly removed a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to the priest. It had the words “20+C+M+B+22” written on it. And beneath it were the words in Latin- “**Christus Mansionem Benedicat**” (May Christ bless this dwelling). Fr Peter stared at the note in surprise. “Where did you find this, Adele?” “I read it in my sister’s encyclopaedia. “During the communist regime, the Polish people would write the above letters as a code for ‘May Christ bless this home’ on the feast of Epiphany. The numbers before and after stand for the year. But first they would get the chalk blessed by a priest. So Fr would you please bless this chalk?”

“Sure, I will, Adele. But I am going to need many boxes of chalk. You see, I want every home in my parish to do this. Would you mind if we borrow your idea Adele?”

“I don’t mind Fr but... but you see Fr. I don’t think I can ask Miss Rozario for any more chalk!”

Fr Peter laughed a loud, hearty laugh. “You don’t have to worry about that little one!” I will arrange the chalk. Come, let me bless yours first.”

The year 2021 saw people the world over adopt this tradition from Poland, a tradition which started in the 18C but became famous during the communist regime. But the world has adopted this anew not because of a political regime but to remind themselves to keep the faith in the face of covid. This simple act of writing on the doorposts with chalk on the feast of Epiphany gave a message to the whole world- Jesus saves, and he has come for all!

Perhaps the feast of Epiphany has brought more than one custom into our lives, and has in a way led to the evangelization of cultures. Take for instance, the tradition of giving gifts. Long before St Nicholas made famous the customary giving of gifts at Christmas, the wise men had already paved the way when they came bearing gifts of extraordinary significance. Today the custom of giving gifts has been adopted into other festivals by people who may or may not know the significance of the magi but who have understood the joy of giving. It only took a little inspiration for malls and brands to adopt the culture of giving and introduce offers, free giveaways during the winter season and have now made it an all year feature. While this may only seem an advertising gimmick, would it be far-fetched to assume that the Feast that taught us Christ is for all nations has also influenced nations and cultures in its simple yet profound message of giving?

As we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, may we look closely at the gifts the wise men bore.

Gold: Gold as we know symbolises Christ’s role as King, not just King of the Jews (which was inadvertently written on the cross) but King of the whole world. The First book of Samuel Chapter 8 introduces us to one of the most decisive moments in Israel’s history. Tired by the state of affairs in the country, the people ask the prophet Samuel for a king. This grieves the heart of the Lord, because they failed to recognise *Him* as their true king. Yet, God deigns to give them many kings and even makes a covenant with David “*When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son.*” (2 Sam 7:12-14)

Jesus is that promised king whose kingdom will last forever. And this is the acknowledgement of the wise men.

Frankincense: Incense of course has been used and is continued to be used in different forms of worship. In gifting the baby Jesus frankincense, the wise men acknowledge him as God. In fact Matthew is quick to remind his readers of the intent of worship that the wise men came with. They tell Herod they want to worship him, and again later... “when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him (Mt 2:11) It is interesting to note that Matthew’s writing is purposeful when he has the wise men notice first the Child and then his mother (v11). Normally, one would notice a mother with her child and not the other way around. The wise men knew what they were looking for. Do we?

Myrrh: The gifts in themselves almost mirror the incidents that play out in Matthew’s nativity narrative. The wise men come looking for ‘the King of the Jews’ (v2) and they gift him gold, they express an intent ‘to worship him’ (v2) and they gift him frankincense but a cloud of gloom hangs over this joyous meeting as Herod orders the death of every male child below the age of two- and they gift him myrrh, a solemn reminder to him of his role as Messiah, the One who will pay the price for the sin of the world.

But apart from the obvious meanings that gold, frankincense and myrrh carry, there is perhaps another significance to these gifts. The wise men were magi or magicians or sorcerers or astrologers. Remember they came studying the star not some scared scripture. Their book of incantations was written with myrrh, it was sprinkled with gold dust and then finally prayed over with incense. In giving the three main ingredients of their sorcery, the wise men are giving up their dependence on false gods, stars and magic because they have finally found the one, true, living God and it is Him they worship.

The wise men return for their country by “another way”. No one can return to their former ways after having met Jesus. We must return to our lives in a new way, even if it means leaving familiar paths behind.

And if we were to delve still further into our lives what do these gifts mean for us today?

In lauding him as King, we are acknowledging Jesus as the Lord and Master of our life. It is like Mary professed “let it be done to me according to your Word” or as Jesus prayed “Not my will but yours be done”. It is in letting Jesus have his way and his will, even when it’s painful or makes no evident sense to us, that we have truly made him King.

In offering incense with the wise men, we are lauding him as God- no other god, object, confidante or friend can take his place – he alone deserves our worship.

In joining the wise men as they give him myrrh, we acknowledge him as our own personal saviour, not just one who died for the world, but one who died for *me*. We are also acknowledging our own sinful and helpless nature after all “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” (Mt 9:12)

As we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, we cannot but think of the long, arduous journey they covered. Perhaps discovering Jesus and the path we have taken seems a long, arduous one to us too. Perhaps it may be helpful to ponder upon what was it that would have kept the magi going? Was it the star? The faith in what they had seen? Their certainty in the fulfilment of their prayers? *More importantly, what, if anything, keeps us going on our journey?*

Even the ‘wise’ men made a sincere yet foolish mistake by taking a little detour from the star they had been following. Sometimes with all our good intent and sincere efforts we lose sight of Him and end up making foolish mistakes. *Think of some of the unnecessary detours you have taken along the way. Were they painful for you? For others? How did you find your way back?*

The wise men ultimately find what their years of searching had led them to, even as the ones who were to announce his birth are lost in a deep slumber. They worship Jesus. *Have we, too, found what our hearts have been seeking when we took on this journey? Have we had a personal experience of God?*

The magi give up their incantations even as the world seemed to be lost in a spell of ignorance and they returned another way. *How has knowing Jesus changed you?*

This Epiphany, may we discover Jesus anew and may we never return the same way again.

Questions to ponder:

- What tradition of Epiphany (could be others not mentioned here) do you want to continue or start as a community?
- What keeps us going in our journey?
- How has knowing Jesus changed us?