

Feast of Epiphany, 2017  
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes  
January 7, 8, 2017

The stories of Christmas are so, so wonderful that in a very real sense they can be their own worst enemy. We can be so taken up by them that we forget their purpose. We lose touch with why these stories were created, namely

- to announce the advent of a Savior for the world
- to reveal that God's love and grace, present in this Savior, is intended not just for me, but for the entire world. (We don't think in terms of the 'entire world' enough.)

The gift of Christmas is God's Son, sent to live among us, for our salvation. We must not let the historical narratives, with all their wonder, cause us to miss the reason for the stories in the first place. For example:

- the manger scene in an out-barn of Bethlehem, that which gives us our traditional crib scene, reveals to us that God has become one of us .. born of woman as all of us are.  
POINT: God has become flesh; God understands and appreciates what it is to be human
- the shepherds find the babe and parents near Bethlehem ... a city in David's kingdom. The babe was born of a woman from the house of David.  
POINT: the Jews, God's Chosen People, are the first to receive the Savior.
- and today's Magi story, travelers from the East, from a great distance ....  
POINT: while born in the City of David, and born as Savior first for the people of Israel, Jesus is Savior for all people. It is probably for this reason that today's Feast is celebrated in the Eastern Church with greater festivity than Christmas Day itself. And, quite nearby, our Amish neighbors celebrate Epiphany in place of Christmas.

Wherever and however the Feast of Epiphany is observed, it always carries with it a strong message of evangelization and concern for migrants. In fact, today begins National Migration Week. This week is to be a time to reflect on the circumstances confronting migrants, including immigrants, refugees, children, and victims and survivors of human trafficking. With respect to migrants, too often in our contemporary culture we fail to encounter them as persons, and instead we look at them as others. We do not take the time to engage migrants in a meaningful way, but we remain aloof to their presence and suspicious of their intentions. Evangelization and Immigrants ... two areas intimately connected with today's Feast of Epiphany, and two areas that many find difficult and challenging. This is especially true when we take seriously Pope Francis' call to actually encounter these others. Why must we do this? Pope Francis says we must do this because God has first encountered us in love, and Emmanuel, "God-with-us" at Christmas is a perfect example of God encountering all of humanity.

Toward the end of this month, we will observe Marches for Life and offer prayers to end legal abortion in our country. Both of these are good, and important. But many people find it hard to make the connection between those efforts on behalf of the unborn, and the human rights and dignity of those who are migrants, legal or illegal. Too often we

seem to draw the line of our concern at the point of birth .... we are very concerned about the unborn, but not as concerned about those born into poverty, difficult home situations, and populations of war and refugees. Maybe the part of the Christmas story of the Magi that we miss is that after the Magi leave, Joseph and Mary pack up with their new born son and leave for Egypt. They are refugees, they are migrants, they live as aliens and strangers in the land of Egypt for several years. How is it that we miss this?

Listen to these words of Pope Francis:

“The Church is Mother, and her motherly attention is expressed with special tenderness and closeness to those who are obliged to flee their own country and exist between rootlessness and integration. This tension destroys people. Christian compassion ...is expressed first of all in the commitment to obtain knowledge of the events that force people to leave their homeland, and where necessary, to give voice to those who cannot manage to make their cry of distress and oppression heard.”

Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for the  
Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, May 24, 2013

Every year for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis has a special message for all Catholics:

“Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women, and men who leave or are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.” (2014)

And in 2015, Pope Francis said,

“Often, however, such migration gives rise to suspicion and hostility, even in ecclesial communities, prior to any knowledge of the migrants' lives or their stories of persecution and destitution. In such cases, suspicion and prejudice conflict with the biblical commandment of welcoming the stranger in need with respect and solidarity.”

With today's Feast of the Epiphany there is simply no way of avoiding the challenge that we as Church are called to be light and hope and protection to migrants. How we respond to their presence is how we respond to Jesus. We all know the gospel mandate: “*Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers/sisters, you do unto me.*” And this can be our opening into the area of evangelization, another area that is difficult and challenging to us. During Christmas we have sung, “Go Tell It On the Mountain” ... yes, we must tell the Good News that Jesus Christ is born.

We like to be around and pray before the crib. But these are statues. Today's Scriptures give us cause to be around and pray with those who struggle, and those who look different than we do. The statues demand nothing of us. Those who are strangers and alone demand everything from us. As St. Paul in today's Second Scripture says, “*We are co-partners with all humanity in the promise of the gospel.*” The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us ... and we have seen His glory. Now let us tell and live this story widely.