

Epiphany “The gift of relationship”
Fr. Frank Schuster

I was blessed this year to have my brother and his family join me again for Christmas Eve. It was wonderful. Although it is really busy at the parish on Christmas Eve, it is always a blessing that we somehow find the time for our annual oyster stew feast and gift exchange. As I shared with you before, our family tradition for exchanging gifts is to get each other one real gift and a gag gift for each other. Although, the “real” gifts each year are usually predictable for the adults, now that their boy Jack is getting old enough, it has been fun buying toys for him. I asked my brother what I should get him and the answer was, of course, anything Star Wars. This made me laugh a little because when I was Jack’s age, all I wanted for Christmas was anything Star Wars too. Go figure. Of course, the rationale for the gag gift is due to our belief that the gift of laughter and enjoying each other’s company is the best Christmas gift of all. For example, this year I talked openly at Thanksgiving about my intention of eating healthier after the holidays are over, and so my Christmas present this year from my brother and sister in law was of course kale flavored candy canes and a bag of raw carrots. It was perfect.

I only mention my family’s gift exchange because the Magi offered special gifts to the Christ Child as well on this feast day of Epiphany. Of course, the three gifts the Magi bring are no jokes, they are highly symbolic. Gold represents the fact that Jesus is royalty, the new King David so to speak. Frankincense represents Jesus’ divinity. Incense would be something you would encounter in holy places, temples, etc. Myrrh was used for funeral purposes, so the gift can foreshadow Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. The Magi’s presence in the Gospel, however, also suggests a fourth gift: the gift of themselves! This is a gift far more precious to Jesus than gold, frankincense or myrrh. You see, Jesus values relationships more than any material thing they could give him.

This weekend we celebrate the journey of three Magi who were following a star in the hopes of developing a relationship with the Son of God. We sing the song, “We three Kings of Orient are”. I always feel like a little bit of a kill-joy by pointing out that Matthew doesn’t suggest that the Magi were kings at all. That tradition came to us from some point in the Middle Ages. Keeping an open mind, if they were kings then they were also Zoroastrian priests because that is what magi were. We get the English word magic from the word magi. They were astrologers, seeking a savior.

The names our tradition has given to these adventurers are Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In fact, there is a wonderful epiphany house blessing that you can write on your door this time of year that you can look up on the web that uses the initials of Caspar Melchior and Balthasar. These initials have the double meaning of Christus, Mansionem, Benedicat, meaning “Christ Bless this Home”.

Nevertheless, the meaning of the Magi's presence before Jesus is the universality of God's saving plan. You see, the Gospel of Matthew wants to make it clear to us: Jesus wasn't born to save only Israel. Jesus was born to save the whole world. This gift of salvation begins with a relationship with the Author of Life. The gift of relationship is a gift exchange better than anything we find under the tree at Christmas time. The gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ brings with it our hope for eternal life. The message behind the story of the Epiphany is that Christ wants to have a relationship with every soul on Earth.

Personally, I believe we are all like these Magi. Indeed we are at times just like these Magi. We are all people who at times feel like we are wandering in darkness seeking light. Life feels like that sometimes. Wandering in darkness seeking light! The problem is: we have the habit of following the wrong star. There is a hunger in the human heart. There is a God shaped hole in our heart that we sometimes fill with all the wrong things. There is an ache in the human heart that only God can satisfy. As St. Augustine observed at the beginning of his Confessions, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you O God."

The Magi were wandering in darkness seeking the light that comes from a relationship with Jesus and this was a very dangerous journey for them. This journey can be dangerous for us as well, because a relationship with Jesus sometimes requires change on our part. But our Magi followed the brightest star and that gives us a challenge today. No matter what dark valley we find ourselves in, no matter what challenges we face, no matter what we see staring back at us in the mirror each morning, all Christ wants to be is our light in the darkness. Dare we follow him?

It is this invitation that underscores yet another gift the Magi gave the baby Jesus, a gift also more precious than gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi offer to Jesus the gift of faith. You see, the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany lose much of their meaning without Easter and the Pascal Mystery. In fact, they lose all their meaning. The Magi's pilgrimage makes little sense without faith and hope in the resurrection and the salvation of the whole world.

My friends, what are the areas in our lives that are dark and bleak right now? What are the areas in our lives where we stumble in the darkness? In what ways have we become spiritually lonely, seeking a renewed relationship with the Author of Life? The invitation now is to seek the light of Christ and become Magi this Christmas season. We are invited to seek the light of Christ in the areas of our lives that need the warmth of his relationship. This Christmas season, can we find the baby Jesus in our hearts and give him the gift of our faith, a gift more precious than gold, frankincense or myrrh? Can we allow his birth to become an anointment for the wounds that fester inside of our hearts?

This Epiphany we are invited to remember the little infant in a crib who is Emmanuel. In turn, we are invited this Epiphany to become like the Magi ourselves, recognizing that we wander in darkness in many areas of our lives seeking the light of Christ. Once we have found that light something remarkable can happen. No matter how dark the world can seem at times, we will never stumble and fall in all of our decision making if we follow the light that leads us to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.