

The Epiphany of the Lord
Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
January 3, 2021

When I first became aware that I would be preaching this weekend on the Epiphany of the Lord, my mind conjured up childhood memories of growing up in St. Louis. A parish, adjacent to my home parish, was named "Epiphany" and I was intrigued that this parish did not have the name of a saint, such as St. Luke, St. Therese or St. James; rather, it just had the name "Epiphany." But I was most fascinated with Epiphany parish because it had a bowling alley, an honest-to-goodness eight-lane bowling alley. And, at the risk of telling how old I really am, Epiphany Lanes had MANUAL pin-setters, kids paid to manually clear and re-rack the pins! I'm sorry to say that my lasting memory of the Solemnity of the Epiphany was not what I learned in religion class in St. Luke Catholic grade school.

So, if the Epiphany has nothing to do with bowling alleys, what are we celebrating today?

Epiphany celebrates the revelation, to **all the nations of the world**, that Jesus is the Son of God. Historically, it's primarily focused on the manifestation to the Magi, but also on Jesus' baptism in the Jordan (which we celebrate next week!) and on the wedding at Cana. Today's Gospel according to Matthew spotlights the Magi, who were the first gentiles to encounter Christ. This visit of the Magi fulfills the prophecy that we heard in our first reading from Isaiah that the Lord has not abandoned Israel; rather, it is through Israel that **all nations** will come to "proclaim the praises of the Lord." This infancy narrative is introducing one of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel: That Jesus is the Messiah and Savior of the whole world and "that the gentiles are," as we heard in Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "coheirs, members of the same body and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus."

These "Magi from the east" paid homage to the Christ child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; gold and frankincense that symbolized the kingship and divinity of the Christ child, and myrrh, a perfumed resin, here a symbol of human vulnerability which foreshadowed Jesus' death and burial.

While the Gospel remains silent about the Magi's actual names, tradition holds that their names are Casper, Melchior and Balthazar, we do know that they were clever, wealthy, and most importantly, brave. Brave since they were charged by King Herod to bring word back to him of the "newborn king of the Jews." It took much courage, and the sensibility to follow the warning in a dream from God, to NOT return to Herod, but rather to depart for their country "by another way."

I want to focus on those last words of the gospel passage: "they departed for their country by another way." Literally, the Magi were clever enough (they are, after all, known as the wise men) to take a route avoiding Jerusalem (and Herod). But the phrase "the Way" had another meaning in the New Testament and early Christian communities; it referred to Christianity before the term Christianity was coined. It originated from Jesus' reply to the apostle Thomas: "I am **the way**, the truth and the life." (Jn 14:6)

While the gospel doesn't tell us what happened to the Magi after they returned home, Christian tradition suggests that as a result of their encounter with the Christ child, the Magi went a different "way;" they were changed. Certain traditions suggest that the magi became Christian and were ultimately martyred for their faith. (In fact, the professed remains of the Magi are contained in a reliquary in the Catholic Cathedral Church in Cologne, Germany.) What, after all, would be more natural than that these men, when they returned home to the east "by another way," discovered that they no longer fit in? After their visit to Bethlehem, their whole world view had changed. They had received from the Christ child infinitely more than they had given him: They had received the faith that brings with it the promise of a heavenly homeland. As a post-script, I would like to encourage each of you to go to the Cathedral website and complete the "feasibility study survey" regarding our plans to build on the east side of the Cathedral property. And...I want

to forewarn Father Paul that if, included in the survey results, there is a suggestion we have a Cathedral parish bowling alley, he'll know where that idea came from!