

JANUARY 3, 2016

The Epiphany of the Lord

READING 1 IS 60:1-6

RESPONSORIAL PSALM PS 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13.

R. (cf. 11) **Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.**

READING 2 EPH 3:2-3A, 5-6

GOSPEL MT 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
in the days of King Herod,
behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem,
saying,
"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage."
When King Herod heard this,
he was greatly troubled,
and all Jerusalem with him.
Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of
the people,
He inquired of them where the Christ was to be
born.
They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea,
for thus it has been written through the prophet:
*And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.*"
Then Herod called the magi secretly

and ascertained from them the time of the star's
appearance.
He sent them to Bethlehem and said,
"Go and search diligently for the child.
When you have found him, bring me word,
that I too may go and do him homage."
After their audience with the king they set out.
And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising
preceded them,
until it came and stopped over the place where the
child was.
They were overjoyed at seeing the star,
and on entering the house
they saw the child with Mary his mother.
They prostrated themselves and did him homage.
Then they opened their treasures
and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and
myrrh.
And having been warned in a dream not to return
to Herod,
they departed for their country by another way.

HOMILY

"The Gift of the Magi" is one of O. Henry's most famous stories. Included in *The Four Million*, his first collection of short stories, in 1906. A brief synopsis: Mr. James Dillingham Young ("Jim") and his wife, Della, are a couple living in a modest flat. They each have one possession in which they take pride: Della's beautiful long, flowing hair and Jim's gold watch, which had belonged to his father and grandfather. On Christmas Eve, with only \$1.87 in hand, and desperate to find a gift for Jim, Della sells her hair for \$20, and eventually finds a platinum fob chain for Jim's watch for \$21. Happy to have found the perfect gift at last, she runs home and begins to prepare dinner. When Jim comes home, he looks at Della with an expression that she cannot read. It terrifies her. Della then admits to Jim that she sold her hair to buy him his present. Jim gives Della her present -- an array of expensive combs for her hair. Della then shows Jim the chain she bought for him, to which Jim says he sold his watch to get the money to buy her combs. Although Jim and Della are now left with gifts that neither one can use, they realize how far they are willing to go to show their love for each other.

The story ends with the narrator comparing the pair's mutually sacrificial gifts of love with those of the Biblical Magi: "The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to

the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”

The season of joyful, loving, though sometimes frenzied gift-giving is over. As we see in the gospel passage for this week’s Feast of the Epiphany, it was the magi who first brought Christmas gifts. As we reflect upon the Christmas season about to come to an end, let’s consider what they teach us about gift giving, and why we gave gifts in the first place—for it is the same lesson as that contained in the O. Henry story: The best gifts are costly. The best gifts leave us broke. The gifts come from the heart, not the store.

FIRST, the best gifts are costly—as symbolized by the magi’s gift of gold. In Jesus’ time, gold was a gift only to be given to a king—royalty were the only ones worthy and able to possess gold. In giving a gift, as Christians we are treating another as if they are a king or queen—for Jesus reminds us, whatever we have done for the least brothers and sisters, we did it for Him. We give a gift to acknowledge the dignity of another, the sacredness of another made in God’s image. In the O. Henry story, Jim and Della give from what is most valuable to them, though not perhaps costly to the world, and in doing so, they express how precious is their beloved—worth something so valuable.

SECOND, the best gifts leave us broken—as symbolized by the magi’s gift of myrrh. Myrrh—the spice used to prepare a body for burial, foreshadowing how Christ will be broken on the cross and die that we might live. In the O. Henry story, the couple in the end seems to have spent all that was valuable and ended up with useless gifts—hair combs without hair and a watch chain without a watch—until we see that in their poverty and brokenness, then love can be clearly seen and expressed. He loved me that much, she loved me that much, Christ loved me that much, that he gave his life that we might live! Gifts that break us, behold, let love be expressed beyond words and undeniably!

THIRD AND FINALLY, the best gifts come from the heart, not from the store—as symbolized by the magi’s gift of frankincense. Frankincense, incense to be burnt before God, symbolizing prayers rising from the heart to the heart of God. In the O. Henry story, Della says when Jim discovers her beautiful hair is missing: “Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered,” she went on with sudden serious sweetness, “but nobody could ever count my love for you.” The gift was merely a way to express the infinite love she had in her heart for her spouse. So too, the gift of prayer is a crying out of the heart of a love, trust, and devotion to God. Each gift we give ought to be a crying out from our heart of love, love for the other, love for the God who created us all.

Well, the season of gifts is over, or is it? In fact, being a Christian means being a perpetual gift giver, giving of what is most costly, even to the point of breaking us, and giving from the heart. For, here at St. Edward, and throughout the world, Christ himself keeps giving the gift of himself to us, as is seen so clearly in the Eucharist, each week. Our response to such love, is to follow Christ’s example with gifts given to those made in God’s image, our brothers and sisters all around our lives. And we are to give these “Christmas” gifts each day. For when we give costly, precious gifts of our very selves, our time, our talents, our treasures, we undeniably show others the love of Christ, which their hearts are aching to see.

Christmas is over—let the giving continue!