Father O’Connor’s Homily for 5 January 2025

Feast of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6

Matthew 2: 1-12

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, and “epiphany” is not an everyday word.

“Epiphany” is from a Greek word, “*epipháneia*,” that means a manifestation, a showing. And today, the Magi – the Wise Men, the Astrologers, the Kings, the Visitors from the East – followed the light of a star, and it led them to Bethlehem where they found the Christ Child. They experienced an “epiphany” – an encounter with the Son of God and the Son of Mary.

We think of the Magi as being three persons, although some legends and stories number them up to twelve. Three became a popular number because they brought three symbolic gifts: gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh [a burial spice] for someone who was going to die. Tradition has given them the names of Casper, Melchior and Balthazar.

Sometimes the Magi are portrayed in our nativity scenes as being from three different races, proclaiming that now all of humanity – Jewish and Gentile – is represented at the crib and has come to worship our Newborn King. It is what Saint Paul is talking about in today’s second reading from his Letter to the Ephesians: “The Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”

Matthew included this visit by the Magi in his Gospel for a very special reason. These Magi were the first **Christophers. *“***Christopher” comes from two Greek words – *Christos/Christ* and *phero/to bear* – that together mean a “Christ-bearer,” a “Christopher.”

The Magi followed the light of the star. It brought them to Bethlehem, and they found the Christ Child, the Light of the World. They carried that light of Christ with them back home so that other people could encounter Christ through them. They were Christ-bearers, “Christophers.”

Now, that is some of the theology about the Feast of the Epiphany. Father Ronald Knox [British Catholic priest-convert, 1888-1957] says that “theology is sometimes like the bright sunlight on a cold winter’s day. It delivers a lot of light, but not much warmth.” So I am going to try to warm up this theology just a little bit for you with a parable that makes a similar point about this Feast of the Epiphany and our calling to be Christ-bearers, or Christophers. It is called “The Parable of the Goat’s Hair Monk.”

In a downtown area in a large city, there was street person who was known as the “Goat’s Hair Monk.” He wasn’t really a monk, but people noticed that at least three times a day he went into one of the old downtown churches known as Saint Martin of Tours to pray. He didn’t wear goat’s hair clothes, but he seemed to mumble that expression a lot. “Goat’s hair. Goat’s hair,” people would hear him say. So he became known as the ‘Goat’s Hair Monk.”

There was something else unusual about this street fellow. He didn’t stand with his hand held out, asking for donations. He carried a large canvas sack and when he noticed another street person who didn’t have a dry pair of socks, he would reach into it and offer a pair.

When he saw someone whose hands were blue with the cold, he would pull out a pair of gloves.

When he would see someone who looked hungry, he would reach into that sack and present them with a sandwich. Every time he did these things he would seem to say to the person receiving them, “Goat’s hair. Goat’s hair,” with his thick German accent and a smile on his face.

There was talk that he had been a millionaire, that he had become a Christian, and then went off the deep end and lived on the street. There were those who suspected that, deep down inside that canvas sack, there was a lot of money.

One day a street kid followed the Goat’s Hair Monk into Saint Martin of Tours Church and watched him as he prayed. Then the old man closed his eyes, and the street kid thought, “Here’s my chance.” He crept up very quietly and went to grab that sack, when the Goat’s Hair Monk let out a karate blow that sent that kid flying across the church aisle. As the kid got up, rather stunned, the Goat’s Hair Monk said to him, “Wise up, kid! You steal from me or from anyone else and all you will get in life is pain. Rob others and you yourself will be robbed of what is precious to you. That is the ancient law. Now go, and remember: GOAT’S HAIR! GOAT’S HAIR!”

The street kid ran out of the church and soon noticed he was being followed by a rival gang. He ran into an alley, and it was dead-end. It was then that he realized what the old gentleman was really saying, with his thick German accent: not “Goat’s hair,” but “God’s here.”

The gang members were coming at the street kid. He saw their baseball bats and their knives, and he said firmly, “God’s here!” and a couple of them stepped back. Then he said it louder: “GOD’S HERE!” and they all disappeared.

The street kid began following the Goat’s Hair Monk. He asked him to teach him how to pray. He became the steady companion of the Goat’s Hair Monk, and learned from him and defended him from danger and helped him care for the poor.

One day the Goat’s Hair Monk lay dying, and the street kid was there with him. Just before he died, the Goat’s Hair Monk took his canvas sack and gave it to the street kid and said, “You have learned your lessons well. Now go and do what you have learned. And always remember: God’s here. God’s here.”

That was the message of the Magi, the first Christophers. The Magi followed the light of the star. It brought them to Bethlehem, and they found the Christ Child, the Light of the World. They carried that light of Christ with them back home so that other people could encounter Christ through them, announcing to them: “God’s here. God’s here.”

You and I are Christophers too. We have witnessed the Epiphany. God has manifested Himself to us in the birth of the Christ Child. “The Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”

We are now Christ-bearers, Christophers to our world. Keep this theme alive in your heart and evident in your living during this New Year. And always remember that God is with us: “God’s here. God’s here.”