

Homily Epiphany Sunday - The Story of the Other Wise Man

Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh.... Kasper, Melchior, and Balthazar. Familiar figures in most every nativity scene.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany.

An Epiphany is a “manifestation” ... an event that clearly shows or embodies something of significance.

Today’s Gospel highlights the journey of three learned men in their search for truth... A truth so significant, that it would change the world. Their gifts speak volumes about how momentous they expected this encounter to be.

I often wonder if the familiarity of this story loses its allure and importance in times like ours. I wonder if we really get the significance of the commitment displayed by these men, to seek out the promise that they read in the stars... The spirit and the passion, that drove them to journey over so great a distance. We know little of the risks and obstacles that they had to overcome in their search for truth... And most of all we know practically nothing of what they made of their discovery... Whether it changed their lives or not?

As I was thinking of these men and their role in salvation history, I stumbled upon an old legend. It arrived quite unexpectedly by email in a reflection written for Crisis magazine by Stephen Fitzpatrick. His reflection in this particular article focused on “The Story of the Other Wise Man” an old legend written by Henry Van Dyke. The story was initially published in 1895 and has been reprinted many times since then. I was captivated by the story, but most especially the struggle between faith and love that the story portrayed. That struggle and the hard choices that have to be made in a life-long search for meaning resonated with me.

Henry van Dyke tells the tale of Artaban, the “Fourth” or “Other Wise Man.” He has planned to join Kasper, Melchior, and Balthazar for the journey in search of the new born King of the Jews. Artaban has sold all he has to procure three gifts for the King, which he has hidden away under his cloak: a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl. Unfortunately he fails to meet up with Kasper, Melchior, and Balthazar at their appointed time and they leave without him.

He misses his appointment because he stops to help a dying man on the side of the road. Artaban makes him comfortable giving him water, a potion of healing herbs, and all of the bread and wine he has left. For this kindness the sick man

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tells Arteban where the Messiah can be found. Artaban now must decide whether he wants to continue his journey or abandon it and return home. He decides to travel on in search of the new-born King, and sells the sapphire for the supplies that he needs to continue.

He arrives in Bethlehem just as Herod's troops are descending on the city. There is the smell of blood in the air and Arteban finds shelter with a woman and her infant son. Roman troops have flooded the streets looking to slaughter all of the baby boys. As a roman officer approaches the woman's home Arteban stands in the door to block his way, and bribes him with the blood-red ruby protecting both mother and child. The mother tells Arteban that the Holy Family has fled to Egypt and that his friends have returned home by another way. Again he is faced with a choice... to continue his search or go on with the rest of his life?

Artaban struggles with his choices. He is always faced with the challenge of pressing on or turning back. He is nagged by the thought that it is wrong to spend for man what was meant for God. This is the conflict between the expectation of faith (what one owes God) and the impulse of love (what one owes to his fellow man).

It is a conflict that we are regularly confronted with in our daily living of the faith. There is something about us that likes everything to be clearly laid out and just so. We like to know where we are headed and we expect our plans to go smoothly to their appointed ends. This is not, however, the spontaneous and improvising language of love. Others often get in the way, and we get sidetracked, and sometimes we get lost

Thirty-three and one-half years later we find Arteban still searching for the King. He is approaching the city of Jerusalem as he has been told that this is where he will find him. It has taken a lifetime but he is at last about to reach his goal. He has kept but one last gift to give to the King, "the pearl of great price." He meets a young girl who is being sold into slavery for her father's debts. She sees Arteban and begs for his help as she is being dragged away.

There is great tension in the city, people are agitated and nerves are short. The old and ever-present conflict of Arteban's soul returns, and again he must choose between faith and love. There is however, but one thing that is certain in his divided heart... to rescue this helpless girl would be a true deed of love. With that certainty he takes the pearl from his bosom, and looks at it with longing and despair. Never had it been so radiant, luminous, and full of tender living luster.

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And with that last glance he lays the gift in the hands of the slave girls as he says...

“This is thy ransom daughter! It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the King.”

As he speaks these words and looks into her eyes the darkness of the sky thickens and shuddering tremors shake Jerusalem collapsing the walls of homes and buildings and sending people scurrying in fear. But Arteban had nothing to fear, for he knew that all was well, because he had never stopped seeking. He had been faithful and true to the light that he had seen so many years ago.

As the earthquake rocked the ground... a heavy tile shook loose from the wall and fell upon Arteban. And as he lay breathless and pale, with his gray head resting on the young girls shoulder, a sweet voice made its way through the twilight, and was heard to say: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these... you did for me.”

Artaban parts with his gifts to save a sick stranger, a threatened child, and eventually a friendless woman in Jerusalem. Like the king he so desperately sought, he empties himself for the sake of others. This is the expectation of faith, that we empty ourselves out of love for others. It is where faith and love meet.

The story of Artaban is really the story of us all. We are all called to be like the “Other wise man.” Spending our lives seeking, and doing good for others with the precious time and gifts we have. This is the expectation of faith and the way we come to know love. For it was out of “love that he laid down his life for us” and it is for love that “we ought to lay down our lives” for others.” (1 John 3:11-21)