

Homily for January 6, 2002
Epiphany Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 60:1-6
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2:1-12

*When we reach our goal, when we find Christ,
it is not what we expect.*

That's what happens to the sages who seek the Christ in our gospel, Matthew chapter 2. When they reach their goal, when they find the Christ, it is not what they expected. They find him not in a palace but in poverty, not in strength but in weakness. They find him enfleshed in the tinyness of an infant, not a beribboned general or warrior king. He is a king but a strange sort who has a manger, and one day a cross, for his throne.

And all this suggests to us that we will not find our life as believers quite as we had expected or, in our softer moments, as we might have wished.

The Christ of poverty calls us to resist being possessed by our possessions, which we can love or covet very much. He also calls us to seek him living today in the poor. The Christ of weakness reminds us that we are not sufficient to ourselves; we need each other and the transcendent power we call God. The Christ of suffering calls us to trust that we in our turn are not abandoned in the days of our own passion.

Another thing many do not expect in their search for their goal, their Christ: finding Christ, or meaning and purpose to life, calls us to service, to a non-ego kind of love. It is unselfish but not so much self-denying as self-fulfilling, because the self is enriched by the other. Another gospel of Saint Matthew, the famous Judgment scene of chapter 25, emphasizes that Christ, or the mystery of the Divine Presence, is found in neighbor. And this presence is to be apprehended by loving, healing, forgiving, and helping – in other words, by human relationships. This, as Saint Paul says in Ephesians chapter 3, is a great mystery, and it calls us to sensitivity and to service.

It is perhaps not what we expect. Many still view religion as a ladder to heaven, which involves little effort to transform the world or even pay much attention to the people in it. But we are called to be more than heavenly minded. The Magi found Christ in a poor working man's family, on the road at that time because of a political decision. To raise armies and taxes, the power structure had decreed a census. All this means that Jesus was born into the midst of human turmoil – into human life. What we mean by God, or Jesus, is not uncovered for us without prayer, and signs like sacraments and communities like church. But the discovery does not stop there. His risen body is

humanity, and his temple, where all good works and decent lives give him glory, is the world. Our presence here is for energy to go forth – this is our high point that presupposes we are in the world daily.

Faith holds that there is an end to all our journeying, and it is not a dead end. It is life, life so abundant that we call it eternal. And we mean by that word fullness, not duration. It is the rose unfolded, no longer the bud. All the goodness we have ever known is held for us, and better, in his arms. All the beauty we have ever seen is held for us, and better, in land beyond the stars. All the joy that we have ever experienced is held for us, and better, in a Sabbath of delights. The Christ we find at journey's end will no longer be weak and powerless. He is the sun that ushers in the new day and he is the Son of God who brings us to his Father's house in ways we might not Journey on our own.

I believe it was the poet W. H. Auden who observed: "We shall each be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the kingdom of God." So let us pray: Lord, as you have opened your treasures to us with the gift of your Son, so let us offer gifts of praise and thanksgiving for your love is everlasting – we pray this through that same Christ our Lord. Amen.

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