

The Nazareth Page
A weekly gospel meditation for the home
January 7th, 2018 – The Epiphany of the Lord
Matthew 2:1-12

Every year I wonder about what's happening about the religious meaning of Christmas. What are we to think about at Christmas? Certainly, most Christians recall the birth of Jesus Christ, especially as it is described in Luke's gospel. In our home, my wife has collected many diverse cultural expressions of the stable scene at Bethlehem. Thus, we have many reminders of that Christmas is about the birth of Jesus.

But then, like a gigantic cloud that blocks out the light of the sun, another meaning of Christmas overshadows us. Its basic message is about gift-buying. Christmas becomes the time when we give or exchange gifts with others. It becomes mostly a commercial event. A materialistic feast that could result in nothing more than giving and getting stuff. Not that this is all bad. Gift-giving and the celebration of Christmas go way back. We are reminded of this connection in today's feast.

Three magi (perhaps scholars from the lands east of the Holy Land) came to see for themselves something wonderful that God had accomplished in the world. Their presence symbolizes two major points. One, they came from a part of the world that was outside God's workings with the Chosen People, the Jews. And second, they were represented "wise" people, i. e., those who used their intellects to seek the deeper truth.

Their gifts were significant enough for Matthew to list them in his gospel. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. So we might ask what do these particular gifts signify? Gold, of course, was a form of coinage that was widely accepted at that time. Gold coins have been found in most cultures. It was also used to decorate holy places like the Temple in Jerusalem. Frankincense when burned gave off a fragrant scent and was also used in the Temple. Its rising smoke symbolized the prayers of the people rising to God in the heavens. Myrrh was also a scented oil that was used for consecrating altars in the Temple but also for healing the sick and the anointing of the dead. The gospels mentioned that Jesus was anointed with myrrh before his being placed in the tomb. All these gifts would have meaning not only because of their value in the marketplace, but because they symbolized our deeper connection with God.

This delightful story challenges us to think of what is the gift we might bring to God who now dwells among us? Certainly, it is not more stuff. The answer lies in other parts of our faith when we learn that God desires our gratitude and love for all we have been given by God. And the sharing of what we have received to those less fortunate.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
January 14th, 2018 – Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 1:35-42

This time each year features major football games. Whether you are a fan or not, it's hard to avoid all the hype and banter about games that are scheduled to be played. All are considered by their advocates as important, monumental, once-in-a-lifetime events. And more than 99% of people who watch these games will be doing so from comfy couches at home or in their favorite sports bar. Few will actually be *at the game*. They will not enjoy the game *in person*.

And because of that, they will miss what true football fans know in their hearts, and that is this: real fans are there in the stands. Freezing, wheezing and shivering. Still, they would not want to be anywhere else. There is no substitute for *personal presence*.

Today's gospel is also about personal presence. It describes two disciples of John the Baptist, one was named Andrew, who was the brother of Peter. Andrew heard John the Baptist call Jesus "the lamb of God." This was not ordinary language and it caught Andrew's attention. What do you mean, he asked? John said them to go and visit Jesus. He's the one you are hoping for, but you must find that out for yourself. Don't rely simply on my opinion. Investigate him *personally*.

The two went to Jesus and spent some time with him. They were impressed. Andrew then brought Peter to see for himself. He was also drawn to Jesus. This was the beginning of the greatest story ever told. Jesus was seen and recognized, and he had recruited his first disciples. All because they came to *personally* know him.

And it's much the same for us. Our Christian faith is a personal faith. It is built from our personal relationship with Jesus. Pope Francis repeats this almost daily: *Go and meet Jesus in prayer. Talk with him. Stay with him as did those first disciples. Learn about him and invite him to be a part of your life.*

Jesus is present in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In the words of the gospels. In those we encounter every day. In our families and friends. Even in us. *But we have to be looking for him*. Its not enough simply to read about him or even think about him. We must personally meet him. How that happens is up to each of us. For those first disciples, they had to stay with him. So that's what they did. It was about 4 o'clock that day, Mark adds. It was important for them to personally remember even that part of the experience.

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January 21st, 2018 - Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 1:14-20

Fishermen can be difficult people to live with. They can be moody. Set in their ways. Their success at fishing is dependent on their knowledge of the waters, their reading of the weather and most fisherman have their own secrets about how to be good at what they do. They are practical men who are proud of their profession and likely to be quite devoted to doing it well. In other words, they are self-directed. No one tells a fisherman what to do.

Thus, we read in today's gospels the story of how four fishermen, seemingly only on an invitation from Jesus (who was NOT a fisherman), dropped their nets, left their boats, said good-bye to the sea and trailed after this stranger. Can you believe it? Seems like a fish story, doesn't it?

Welcome to speed-discipleship in Mark's gospel. First, a word about that. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four gospels and most scholars say it was the first gospel written down. It described the life of Jesus as if Jesus was in a hurry. It's a gospel with lots of quick action and continued movement. The calling of the fishermen is a good example of this. One minute they are thinking about their recent catch of trout and the next, they are on the road for parts unknown.

Such a complete change is often called religious "conversion." Some Christian groups emphasize the exact moment when one hears the call of Jesus to convert. And when one responds to that call. Catholics take a different approach and are more attentive to the on-going call of Christ to follow him. In that sense, Christ calls us to follow him day after day, year after year. What's important in all situations is to be open to receive Christ's invitation.

What's different for us is that Jesus does not invite us to follow him as he did along the Sea of Galilee with those fishermen. For us, his call comes through people we know like our parents, religious leaders like priests and deacons, trusted friends, it really could be anyone. God can be quite creative when it comes to conversion matters. And most religious conversions are not major happenings with all the bells and whistles. They are simple, down-to-earth moments when we open our eyes and ears and sense that God wants this or that from us. Maybe a lift for neighbor's doctor's visit, maybe an accepting presence to a child's worries, maybe a donation to a hungry stranger. The point is to be ready to drop your nets (sometimes at a moment's notice) and do what God asks of you.

David M Thomas, PhD

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A gospel meditation for the home
January 28th, 2018 – Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 1:21-28

The worlds described in much of contemporary literature and cinema contain all kinds of creatures. Some look like exotic and terrifying animals (often greatly enlarged) from an earlier era. Some look like they are part-machine and part-human. Some are small and slithery (often millions of them) and some are gigantic and very scary. Some stories come from ages long past and some from the distant future. All those worlds seem populated by a few good creatures and lots of evil ones. The goal is always the same: survival! Somehow the evil forces must be overcome, conquered, destroyed ... or else! Fear abounds until a hopefully victorious conclusion.

You might be surprised to learn that people during the time of Jesus had created a world much like what I have just described. They believed that the world was filled with all kinds of spirits. Some were benevolent or angelic and others were the opposite. Belief in evil spirits or demons was commonplace. Unravelling what might be purely superstitious from reality was difficult. One thing was certain. The spiritual world as then imagined readily created fear and anxiety among many.

A primary goal of Jesus was to dispel unwarranted fear among those he lived with and taught. He never wanted people to be unduly scared or frightened. If there was real danger, yes, deal with that. But be careful about creating fear where that was not necessary. For Jesus, the dominance of fear made it difficult for people to believe that God loves them and that they and their lives are good. Fear can blind us to goodness.

Thus, right at the beginning of Mark's gospel someone appears with what's described as "an unclean spirit" who seems to contest the presence and the message of Jesus. Such people can ruin a good party (to say the least) or disrupt a peaceful gathering. They can block anyone hearing "the good news" that Jesus was bringing. Jesus immediately recognizes the danger and drives out the evil spirit. God and evil are not equally powerful. God conquers evil in the end.

There is a personal message in this gospel and it has to do with the power of fear which can prevent us from living with trust in the good life that God is creating in us. Think of it this way: If we fill our minds with the thought that evil is winning in our world today, if we grow despondent that good will survive, if we think that all is lost, then what does that say about God's presence among us? Can fear itself destroy us? And what messages do we communicate to the young? Hopelessness? I hope not.

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