

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

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The Epiphany of the Lord

One Summer day many years ago, I and my friend Fr. John Ubel, who is Rector of the Saint Paul Cathedral, were touring ourselves around the rural southern part of our archdiocese just visiting parish churches that we had not seen before. We arrived eventually at St. Columbkil church in the tiny town of Belle Creek, which is about an hour from here. The church is situated in the middle of the country—surrounded by farm fields and accessed by a dirt road. It doesn't have a resident pastor and the church itself was locked. At first we were disappointed not to be able to see the place, but then I posed this question to Fr. Ubel: If you were going to hide a key to this building, where's the first place you'd think to put it? He answered, "Why, directly beneath this potted geranium plant right here on this landing." We picked up the pot and, voila! There it was, and we let ourselves in for a self-guided tour. When you are trying to protect something that is valuable, it's good to be appropriately cautious about it. Hiding a key to the church was probably a good and necessary idea, but hiding there probably wasn't. A few people need to know how to gain access to the place, but probably not just any roving strangers should know that.

And speaking of roving strangers, it was quite a curious conversation that the Magi from the East carried on with King Herod when they arrived in Jerusalem that day. They came to ask directions to see the child Jesus—the newborn King—having followed his star for days or perhaps weeks. And Herod's response? "What star? What King?" Herod didn't even know where the child was *supposed* to be born, even though it had been written right there in the scriptural prophecies for centuries. He had to ask the scribes for that information. Anyone who cared to look in the books could discover that, just as anyone who cared to look up at the stars could notice something unusual there. The key to this treasure—Jesus Christ—was there for anyone to discover if they really wanted to, just like the key to St. Columbkil, but you have to *look*, with an understanding of what you are hoping to find. The Magi—the so-called "Three Kings of the Orient"—weren't even Jews. They were simply wise—wise enough to recognize when something significant and from God was taking place in their very midst, and to follow that key wherever it took them. The difference between those three men and Herod's Jerusalem is that the Magi were *looking* for something—something they didn't even know, because they didn't know the writings of the Old Testament. Herod could have known, and should have known, and didn't care to look.

Today's Epiphany feast reminds us that the story and the mission of Jesus Christ is not privileged property or information for just a few, or for any one nation or culture or religion. It is open to, and intended for, anyone—everyone—who cares enough to notice, to look, to ask and to follow. Find the key to the church in Belle Creek wasn't an act of magic. It was the result of pretty basic thinking, combined with a desire to discover.

In the same way, the discovery—the Epiphany—of Jesus today does not require a degree in theology or the discipline of a monk or even much religious piety or practice. It requires the same desire to encounter God that those wise men had in Bethlehem, and the willingness to act on that desire by looking around carefully at what is going on in our lives and in our world every day.

There is plenty of bad and depressing stuff to notice in all that, and that's the easy and obvious part. But there is so much more that may require a more sustained and clear gaze, helped by the light of faith. So much more compassion, kindness, forgiveness, action for justice and peace, so much more grace alive each day that we live—even in the very midst of all the rest. If we truly desire to discover the key, we will, even if others seem not to believe or care.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem came about in the middle of the night in an unnoticed place, amid the terrors of Roman political and religious persecution, not more than five miles from King Herod's palace—and he had no idea. But we do, as the Magi did, as do all people who genuinely want to see and worship this savior.

Let us pray for eyes open to see what is already in our midst but easily overlooked—the Lord who is always with us—Emmanuel.