

Year A – Epiphany of The Lord

Leading up to the celebration of Christmas two weeks ago many of us participated in the tradition of sending and receiving Christmas cards. Have you noticed that there is a wide variety of the types of cards available? Some cards just say “Happy Holidays” without a mention of Christmas or any specific occasion. Some cards may say “Merry Christmas” but make no mention of the religious reason for Christmas. Some cards will have a religious scene, such as the Nativity, or a Madonna and Child, or the Holy Family, or even the Three Wise Men whom we celebrate today. There is one other image that also appears on some Christmas cards, that is the image of a dove with a message of “Peace On Earth.” That message is taken from the saying of the heavenly host in the Gospel from Christmas which proclaimed “on earth peace” at the birth of Jesus.

Here we are 2,000 years later and we live in a world where “peace on earth” seems like a distant ideal that may never be attained. Around the world, in our country and in neighborhoods there are divisions and dangers that are at work to keep the ideal of “peace on earth” from becoming a reality. Even though the world is not caught up in an all out war of country against country there are numerous regional conflicts that seem to be insoluble. These conflicts can be about territory, clan or ethnic violence, or religious intolerance, but are really always about power. In our country there are divisions about domestic policies that have seemingly split the country into two opposing camps: gun violence, abortion, affordable care, a just wage, to name a few. The people in the opposing camps are not always the same and can switch places depending on the issue raised. In our own neighborhoods we are now dealing

with a new silent killer of “peace on earth,” opioid addiction. Is “Peace on Earth” just a nice sentiment to appear on Christmas cards?

When we talk about power there was none more violent in using his kingly power than Herod the Great, who we meet briefly in today’s Gospel. Herod was called “Great” because he stayed in power for 30 years. He did this by making sure that any of his potential rivals for the crown, including members of his family, were eliminated via death from challenging his rule. He was allowed to remain in power by Rome because he maintained the peace for Rome, even though it was far from the “peace on earth” that Jesus’ birth heralded.

The others that Matthew mentions, the magi, are something of a mystery and have their own checkered history in the understanding of the Church. In Jesus’ time magi were part of a priestly class in the East who followed the astrological signs in the skies feeling that they provided an understanding of events on Earth. Over the centuries the magi have been identified in scripture as wise men, kings, and astrologers. The Gospel does not identify how many magi there were but we have settled upon the number three based on the number of gifts presented. Again, though names are not provided in the Gospel people have identified each of the three with their own names.

Matthew draws a sharp contrast between the magi, and King Herod and the chief priests. The magi follow the sign, a star, which tells them something important is happening. They believe that they will find the newborn king of the Jews. Not knowing exactly where to go they head to the capital city, Jerusalem. King Herod, who has done all sorts of evil to remain as king, feels threatened by this announcement of a newborn king of the Jews. Matthew tells us all Jerusalem

is also troubled, but not so much about the announcement but by how King Herod might react to a new threat to his rule. The chief priests provide the scripture basis for where a new ruler of Israel would be born, Bethlehem.

Again, Matthew draws a contrast between the magi, and King Herod and the chief priests. Knowing where scripture identifies as the birth place of the new born king of the Jew would be born you would think that the chief priests would be interested in searching out the one they have been waiting for. Instead nothing is said about them even being interested in seeing the scripture fulfilled. Could it be that a messiah would disturb their position of religious power over the people? King Herod, who was not a Jew and wanted to remain in power, only had one concern, where was this child and how to eliminate another threat. The non-Jew magi went to search for the child whose star they were following. The magi find Jesus, present their gifts, and depart and are not mentioned again in the Gospel.

The Gospel also has some misunderstandings about what is happening. The magi come looking for the "King of the Jews." We have long looked on this as the first outreach to non-Jews. The title they use for the newborn king, "King of the Jews," was incorrect and one never to be used by Jesus for himself. This was the title that hung above his head on the cross as a mockery of his ministry. Jesus understood himself to be more than a king because being a king was only about power over others; Jesus knew himself to be the Son of God and our savior. Maybe when the magi presented their gifts they also realized they were in the presence of more than a king. The Gospel tells us the magi did Jesus homage and presented their gifts: gold, for a king, frankincense, incense for a priest, and myrrh, for use in a burial. Yes, maybe after being in the

infant Jesus' presence, they realized that his child was intended for something great for the whole world.

I started by pointing out how the world is in need of real peace on earth. The only real peace on earth that the world can trust in is the peace that Jesus offers to all people. Just as the magi followed the light from the star in the sky we are called to follow the light of truth that is Jesus. We have the scriptures that tell us more than chief priests knew at Jesus' birth, the Gospels tell us who Jesus really is and the reason he has come into our world; not for power but for peace in peoples' hearts. Just as the magi were on a journey to see some extraordinary event, we are each on our own journey of faith. We are guided on our journey by the Gospels' recounting of the ministry of Jesus and that he is truly the Son of God. It is only through belief in Jesus and remaining on our own faith journey that we can truly find real "Peace on Earth."