

**Order of Malta
Epiphany of the Lord Homily
January 2021**

My dear friends, it's a great joy to be able to celebrate this Mass with all of you, and we are very happy to have Dr. Peter Kelly here and his wife, and the Gibsons and Ed Delaney and our very good friends Fr. Brian Kiely and Monsignor James Moroney joining Monsignor O'Leary and myself.

I want to wish all of you a very blessed Epiphany which has been called 'The little Christmas', and it is a wonderful Feast for us to be gathering because it is our way of celebrating the incarnation of Christ and His manifestation in our midst.

A couple of weeks ago there was a report in the Newspapers, in the New York Times and all the papers, about the closing of the *Arecibo Telescope*, a 900-ton instrument in the mountains of Puerto Rico that just collapsed. I knew that spot because when I was a young sub-deacon as Brother Sean, I was sent to work in a village in the mountains near *Arecibo* called *Utado*. It was a wonderful place, in those days it was about 6 or 7 hour-drive from San Juan and very difficult roads, and when you got there, there were only jeeps and horses and many of the chapels we had to go to on horsebacks. The country people who they called *Jibaros*, lived in very small houses throughout the countryside. We had many chapels out there and sometimes we would go for a meeting or something at night and it was very dark, and every person would have one or two light bulbs to illumine their homes. But precisely because there was no light pollution and we were up in the mountains, you could look out at the sky and see millions and millions of stars, and they seemed so close, so you could reach out and touch them. I'm sure that was one reason that they build a huge Telescope there.

You need darkness to be able see the stars. Sometimes it's in the darkness of our pandemic that we can have a sense of how close our God is to us. We live in light pollution and so distracted by so many things, but there are moments of darkness where we can really see the stars.

The Magi were seekers and they were men who used the stars to guide them. It's important for us not just to see the signs, but to be able to interpret them. I often tell people jokingly that when I was named a Bishop, that day there was an eclipse of the Sun, and I'm sure that was a sign,

but I do not know how to interpret it to this day. But we need to be able to interpret the signs and the signs of the time.

We are called on a journey like the Magi's. It's a journey, a quest to find our way home to God. The compass, the star that we have is very important. And that is our faith. But like the Magi, we are not called to make the journey alone, we do it with our companions, with our community.

What is the meaning of Epiphany? Well, it's a Greek word that means manifestation, a revelation. When I was in the Virgin Islands, the Rabbi there was a very close friend of mine, Rabbi Relkin, and I remember him saying one day, "You know Sean, I was assigned once to a congregation in Salt Lake City, Utah", he said, "The only place in the planet where I was called a Gentile."

Well, in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, the world is divided into two categories: God's people and everyone else. The Israelites and the Gentiles. The surprise is that the Messiah comes for both. Isaiah said that he would be the light of the nations, that is the light for the Gentiles as well.

At Bethlehem the first to arrive, of course, were the Jews, the shepherds, poor people representing those *anawim*, the people of the faithful God longing and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. But the next to come were the Magi, from the nations.

In the middle ages, they sort of filled-in the blanks, describing the three Magi, giving them names, Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, to correspond to the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And when the artists in the middle ages began to depict them, they depicted them as one being Caucasian, European, one Asian, and one African, to demonstrate that this was truly the manifestation of God, universal love, and the fact that the Messiah, the Savior had come for everybody in the world. God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son.

When they asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus gives them the example of the Samaritan, the foreigner, the other, to show us God's universal love. Jesus dies to save all of us.

Epiphany is the manifestation, the revelation, and in this Feast, there are three themes that are woven, and of those certainly the adoration of the Magi has eclipsed the other two; but the Baptism of Jesus which is the manifestation of the Trinity, the voice of the Father, the presence of

the Spirit in the form of a dove. Jesus' first miracle at Cana transforming the water into wine, and there the disciples came to believe in Jesus. So, in Bethlehem, the Jordan and Cana are the manifestations and the Epiphany.

The first reading today speaks to us about the return from the Babylonian captivity to rebuild the Temple. I often think that the Babylonian captivity is a good metaphor for the way we live in today's world, immersed in a world of unbelief. We have the need for a community of witnesses to be able to announce the good news.

In the Gospel today, we see that Herod had the word of God. When the Magi couldn't find their way, they went to Herod to ask for directions. And Herod, with his men and the Scriptures, had the information, but information is not enough, even having the Scriptures is not enough, if we do not plant the word of God in our hearts. Discipleship is not about having information, is about relationships.

The star guided the Magi, at times that were clouds, and during the day they couldn't see the star; they needed to seek advice. The Magi were seeking, they were looking for meaning, meaning for their life. They were looking for happiness, and they were looking for salvation. All of us are seeking the same things. Many years ago, I went to Paraguay when a friend of ours, a priest of the Virgin Islands, who Fr. Kiely and I know very well, was named Bishop of a new diocese, the Diocese of San Lorenzo in Paraguay. It was a rural diocese and it was a wonderful celebration. In fact, the President of the Republic came, and at the end of the Mass he spoke, and he announced that there was going to be an amnesty. He had several prisoners in the pews, and he asked them to stand and he announced that in honor of the new Bishop and the new Diocese, that he was going to free all of these prisoners and give them amnesty. The Nuncio was sitting next to me and he look down and said, "Umm, they look like a bunch of chicken thieves to me." I said, would you have preferred serial killers?

But it was a beautiful gesture, and really, Epiphany is about the fact that the amnesty applies to us, that Jesus is our Savior as well, not just the chosen people of Israel, but the Irish and the Italians, and the Asians and the Africans, the Pacific Islanders, and everybody. Hence, Epiphany is a big deal.

We are all seeking these things in our quest for God in our lives, and faith is like a GPS: at times, it calls on us to recalibrate. We live in a world where science so often has replaced religion

in people's lives; and science help us to discover a lot about the world around us, the meaning of things; but it's only our faith that allows us to discover why we are here, where are we going, what our purpose is, what our mission is. And that faith is the star that is guiding us. We discover in faith that everything that we have and everything that we are is a gift, and that our mission here is to make a gift of ourselves to God and others. That is our vocation. To live a life of discipleship is to be a good steward of the gifts that we have received.

A very strong message of the spirituality of the Order of Malta is precisely that, a sense of stewardship, a sense of being called to use our gifts, our time, talent and treasure at the service of those in need, especially the sick and the poor.

Faith is our GPS, the star that leads us to find God hidden in plain sight. The Magi were surprised to find Him in the face of a little baby, in a stable, in a manger, in poverty.

In the Eastern churches, the Orthodox Christians and Eastern Rite Catholics, they have a little, I call it **contraption**, that they put on top of the patten at Mass, and it has a star dangling there, because the star of our faith also leads us to the Eucharist. The Eucharist has a very beautiful Christmas connection: Bethlehem means, the House of Bread, and Christ is the Bread come down from heaven and placed in a manger to feed the flock. And our faith leads us to discover God's presence in the Eucharist, our God who has come to feed us. And in Jesus' account of the Last Supper, speaks to us of another Epiphany of God hidden in plain sight. I was hungry and you gave me to eat. Each time we reach out to those who are hungry, sick, strangers and imprisoned, the star of Bethlehem is illuminating the face of Christ hidden in plain sight.

Happy Feast of the Epiphany.

The amnesty is for us too.