

January 9, 2011  
Solemnity of the Epiphany  
Isaiah 60:1-6  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you like football, especially college football, these are the best days of the year. Besides the NFL playoffs, there's the college championship tomorrow, and recently the Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl, Orange Bowl, Cotton Bowl, even the Fight Hunger Bowl and the Humanitarian Bowl.

A couple seasons ago, my school had briefly ascended to #2 in all the polls. I read that they are already highly ranked for the next football season, that is this autumn. In an expression of extreme snobbery, I publicly root against them. I hope that they'll fail, that they'll perform like Columbia University which lost 44 in a row during my college days. A losing football team, that's a mark of real school – an academic institution, not a business which often exploits young people.

But here's a secret. Part of me, the part I hide, still roots furiously for my college team, wanting them to stomp on rivals, to be #1. It's completely irrational rooting for them; it's completely irrational generating any emotion about them at all.

Sports give many of us a real charge, releasing intense emotions – ups and downs, euphoria and desolation. It's bizarre. I suppose it satisfies some kind of spiritual, emotional need. I remember being eight or nine in the early '70s and staying up late watching the A's win another World Series, and dancing and rejoicing. When I got up for school the next morning, I gradually recognized as the day wore on that nothing had really changed. My life hadn't changed. The victory was surprisingly empty. It was a bit like discovering the emperor had no clothes. And yet 35 years later, I still care.

Liz Taylor had a heap of jewelry, and some thieves broke in and stole a bunch of it. She didn't get upset, and someone in the press asked her why she wasn't more emotional about it. She said, "I don't cry for things that don't cry for me." That's sane.

What happens in sports isn't worth crying over. It's not worth any bitterness. It doesn't really change our lives if our favorite team wins, or loses. It doesn't really matter, regardless of how many times the announcers describe some game or play as historic. That's insane. It doesn't make a real difference.

In our world, we use sports and athletes for emotional expression, for feeling part of something bigger than ourselves. It can be a consuming passion. Our cathedrals are our stadiums and arenas, places of intense collective experience. But the thing itself, what causes the emotion, is empty.

We may want to be able to give ourselves over emotionally to more, to something that can make a real difference in our lives. We may want more in our lives, a greater sense of meaning, a grander vision of life, a more inspiring purpose. Where do we find real value and importance? An essential part of a good life is seeking more, searching for truth and meaning.

The magi, the wise men, set out on a journey looking for more. They went to King Herod, king of the Jews, and asked him where they could find the child who had been born king of the Jews. Herod had a long, vicious, bloody history. He murdered any threats – real or perceived – to his throne, including some of his own children. The magi looking for another king frightened Herod. Herod called together the religious leaders and experts, the religious establishment, to find out more about this potential difficulty. They told him that scripture said that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem.

Herod called the Magi and secretly met with them, instructing them to go to Bethlehem and to find the child so that he, too, could come and worship him. Of course, if the wise men had believed this one, they wouldn't still be regarded as wise. They left Herod, and when they found Jesus, they paid homage to him, falling down and prostrating themselves before this baby. The wise men didn't report back to Herod, but escaped to their own country. Full of rage, Herod ordered the murder of all male children under two in the region of Bethlehem – the Slaughter of the Innocents.

Matthew shows us two kinds of kings: one of this world, operating out of fear, causing fear, using violence, exercising great might, but wholly unconcerned with justice, one that sees others as threats; and one of God, operating out of vulnerability and meekness, seeking trust and love, calling for compassion and mercy and justice, one that sees others as connected to us and enriching life. We have a choice what we want to rule in our lives.

In the story, the harsh, unpleasant irony is that the pious, religious people don't make the right decision. All of Herod's religious authorities, the conventionally religious, they didn't welcome and provide hospitality to the Magi. No warmth, no concern, no interest, no care. They didn't join them in searching for Jesus. They preferred the status quo. We can't have both the status quo and God as the ruler of our lives.

The Magi get it. It's the Magi, the pagan foreigners, the aliens, the strangers who are looking for more. They search for God. The people without scripture,

without centuries of history with the Lord, they connect with God. They come and worship Jesus. They offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but they do that after worshipping, that is after giving the greatest thing they have – themselves. That’s what God most wants.

Why didn’t the priests and the conventionally religious folks join the Magi and look for God? Did they not want to associate with foreigners, outsiders, strangers? Were they not curious in other people? Were they unable to break from the familiar? Was seeking no longer part of their spiritual lives? Had they lost confidence in their ability to grow and learn and change?

The priests and conventionally religious folks didn’t appreciate that the Magi had spiritual gifts and that they might learn something from the Magi. They didn’t regard the Magi as a blessing in their lives. The Magi were different, and the conventionally religious didn’t appreciate that their difference meant that they offered a wisdom the conventionally religious didn’t have. The conventionally religious ignored them.

This drama is acted constantly, every day. It happens every Sunday here and in every parish in the world. A stranger arrives at the door: how do we respond? Can the Christians in that community care enough, risk enough to show hospitality, to make space for those who are different, to learn from those with divergent views and experiences? Or are they like the conventionally religious in today’s gospel?

Jesus said, “Whoever accepts and welcomes a child in my name and for my sake accepts and welcomes me.” (Mt 18:5) He says of those who welcome strangers that they welcome him. (Mt 25:35) The Letter to the Hebrews urges us to offer hospitality to strangers, noting that by doing so some have extended hospitality to angels without ever being aware of it. (Heb 13:2) Scripture tells us that in other people, perhaps especially the outsider, we encounter the presence of God.

We all are on a journey through life, and we all know what it’s like to be a stranger, but seeking something more. We all need help and nourishment to continue on the way. A lot of what our world offers is empty; it doesn’t make a real difference. We come to God’s house, to his table where he feeds us, cares for us, and sends us on our way. If our worship is real, if we are truly giving ourselves, falling down before Jesus, giving ourselves to him, then we welcome others as he has welcomed us. When we discover and appreciate the spiritual gifts and the wisdom of other people, especially people different than ourselves, then we’re seeing Jesus.

Jesus went to a football game, and as the story came to me, it was between the Catholics and the Protestants, but it could have been between any two

groups with strong differences, be it Christians and Muslims, Tea Partiers and the Rainbow Coalition.<sup>1</sup>

The Catholics got the ball first and marched down the field and scored a touchdown. Jesus went wild, rooting and cheering, jumping up and down and excited. Then the Protestants got the ball, and they too marched down the field and scored a touchdown. Again, Jesus went wild, cheering and jumping around. Someone nearby tapped him on his shoulder and asked, "What's going on? Who are you rooting for? What side are you on?" Jesus said, "I'm on both sides, and I'm enjoying the game."

The Feast of the Epiphany recalls God showing himself to the Gentiles. He reaches out to those outside and welcomes them. When we orient our lives to God, then life is less about competition, rivalry, us versus them, but rather more about cooperation, bridge-building, unity. It's seeing that God is present in ourselves, in each other, in the stranger.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Story based upon 'Jesus at the Football Match,' Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird*, Image Books (1984), p. 147.