

Homily

Epiphany of the Lord - B

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
January 07-08, 2022

Is 60: 1-6
Ps 72: 1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13
Eph 3: 2-3, 5-6
Mt 2: 1-12

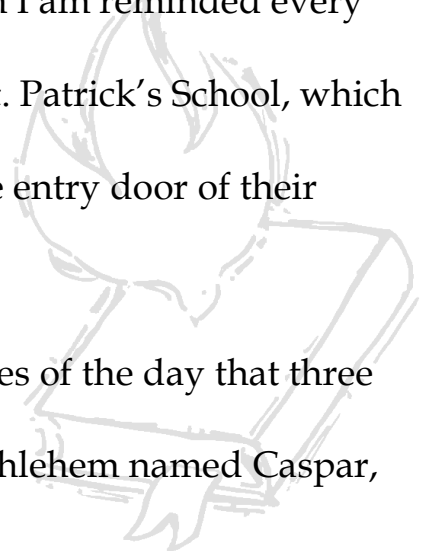
Take a piece of poster board and write the following onto it:

AD 20 + C + M + B + 23

Does anyone know what these symbols mean or how they are used together?... *Wait for a response.*

Today we celebrate *Epiphany Sunday* (also known as “little Christmas”), a word that comes from the Greek *epiphainen*, which means, “to shine upon,” “to manifest,” or “to make known.” Thus the Feast of the Epiphany celebrates the many ways that Christ, and the light of His salvation, is made known to the world. On this day, many cultures participate in a special custom of which I am reminded every time I walk into the sixth grade homeroom of St. Patrick’s School, which very proudly displays this sign each year on the entry door of their classroom.

According to the custom, we remind ourselves of the day that three kings from the east visited the baby Jesus in Bethlehem named Caspar,



Melchior and Balthasar. Now the bible does not tell us that these men were kings; rather, they were magi, astrologers, or wise learned men from the east. The bible does not tell us the names of these men nor does it tell of how many men there actually were. The bible does not even tell us that the men visited our Lord in a manger; rather, we are told that the magi visited the Christ-child in a house. Popular culture filled in the details of this story from the fourth to the sixth century and attached a more fleshed-out tale about these men as well. What we are told in Matthew's gospel is that these wise men encountered a child-king in Bethlehem and presented this child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, symbols of the royal dignity that is provided for a king.

As the tradition goes, every Epiphany, especially in European countries like Germany, the family gathers in their own home to bless their entry way to recognize the Christ-king as the magi were blessed by the Lord's presence in that house at Bethlehem. The family may ask a minister to come and bless the house for them. The minister will bring water and incense, sprinkling the house with holy water and allowing the incense to carry the prayers of the family up to heaven. The family

would then read from scripture, most likely the reading from today's gospel of Matthew and then the priest will then take a piece of chalk, which reminds the family that each of us is dust and are dependent on the Lord to raise us to heaven.

With this chalk, the head of the family writes above the lintel of the front door the symbols on this card – 2023, separated by the names we traditionally give to the three kings (who are neither three nor kings) – *Caspar, Melchior, & Balthasar* – with crosses separating these symbols to remind us of the Lord's presence. Some Protestant communities have changed the significance of the three letters, focusing on the presence of Christ in the house over the three kings. In this tradition, the letters stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat* or *May Christ bless this home*.

And every year at Epiphany, this twelfth day of Christmas (when this feast takes place on its original day of January 6th), the family gathers together once again to celebrate the tradition of the Epiphany House Blessing, erasing the blessing of the old year to write upon the lintel the symbol of God's presence in the New Year. As they do so, the family once again offers the prayer that accompanies this yearly house blessing:

“Caspar, Melchior & Balthasar followed the star of God’s Son, who became man two thousand nine years ago. May Christ bless our dwelling and remain with us throughout the year.” (In some customs, the faithful also add “and protect us again this year from the dangers of fire and water.”)

Now I have offered this explanation of the “Wise Men House Blessing” on more than one occasion as a Catholic priest. I have often prayed the words “protect us again this year from the dangers of fire and water.” But especially this year, those words and this blessing took a very personal turn in the life of my family and the Blessing of the Kings saved my house.

As you are all very aware, the weather before Christmas turned our parking lot into an ice skating rink and very much iced most of the roads within Will County itself. Conditions became so dangerous that both deacons of St. Patrick’s took pretty bad spills on Christmas Eve, forcing them to stay home and rest during the Christmas Masses this year. The weather closed schools, closed businesses and made travel very dangerous for the days surrounding Christmas itself.

As you also know, the milder weather that followed Christmas proved to be a grateful relief for all of us as well. Unfortunately, the mild weather also melted the ice to a point that flood warnings were posted for much of Illinois, including Will County. The houses in Plainfield were at risk – waters were rising at the same levels as in September, when the waters of a hurricane threatened the well-beings of many homes in the area.

Last week on a Saturday night, I received a desperate call from my father, whose house was about to become deluged with water for the second time in four months. The city of Plainfield was kind enough to deliver over 250 bags of sand to each house that was adjacent to the river, including my father's house. The bags weighed at least forty pounds each – when they became soaked with water, the bags became even heavier. My father's age prohibited him from carrying the bags and I happened to be the only member of the family to live nearby. And so, as I begrudgingly drove to my father's house on a Saturday night, I yelled at God for making my day such a difficult one. Needless to say, I was not singing Christmas carols last Saturday night.

Then Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar showed up.

On a whim, I called a couple friends of mine, Denis Brunner and Bob Vergo, who heard my lament and ran with it. Dennis called a group of friends from the Plainfield chapter of *The Knights of Columbus*; Bob called a bunch of guys from our parish's *Men's Club*. By the time the whole group arrived at my father's house last Saturday night, over 20 individuals from the area were hauling forty pound bags to and fro as if they were waiting for someone to offer an invitation for their help. What they did in less than a half an hour would have taken me a whole evening to do on my own.

But then these men and women were not through. Because they finished my father's house so quickly, the group started visiting neighbor upon neighbor, hauling bags of sand down the block to assist the needy of the Plainfield area. By the time everyone was finished, cookies were passed out and beverages were consumed (both with malt and without), but more importantly, a great deal of stressed relieved itself from the worried families who feared that their houses would be inundated by the flood.

A few days later, this group returned in order to remove the bags of sand from the respective houses and carry them to the curbside, where the city of Plainfield came to pick them up. The feast that took place after the haul lasted twice as long as the work itself and those who dined at my father's house confided with me of their hope that they would be called more often, if not for the food then for the camaraderie.

We are taught in the faith that this feast of the Epiphany is the revelation from a star about who the king of kings really is. We realize that even for a king, a pope, a Church leader or a civil one, all of us bend a knee to the Christ-child who bent his knee for us, both in the crib and on the cross. As Christ served us (and still does), so we are called to do for each other. And in that spirit, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar are still bending their knees in service, in Christ's name, as represented by the men and women in our parish, by the men and women in our community.

The loving hearts that enthrone our Lord and give him honor is best represented by the verse of a son that I wish to use as a fitting conclusion to today's homily. Through prayer and Christian service, we

no longer ask “What Child is This?” We know who the child is when we model the life that he offers us. This is the song:

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

Let us honor this babe, our beginning and our end, our great king and our prophet, in the way that we give fitting praise of his life by a life of Christian service and love. This is how the spirit of the three kings (who are most likely neither three nor kings) is very much with us. This is our prayer.