

Homily

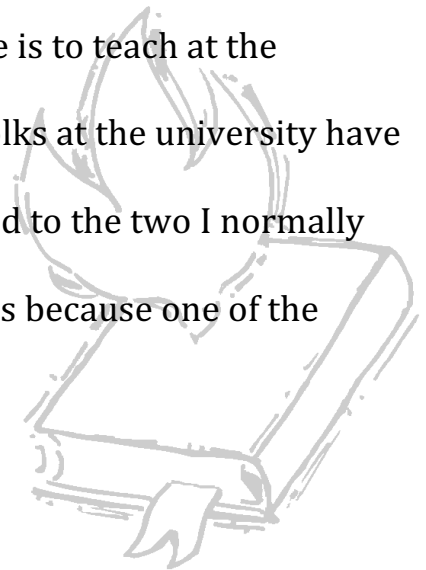
Epiphany of the Lord - A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
January 04-05, 2020

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

As I have preached before, I am responsible for three areas of ministry the diocese, among other things. Number one, I have told you that I am a chaplain at the Jerome Combs Detention Center in Kankakee for undocumented immigrants who get exported from the country. In this capacity, I have to deal with families who are suffering from being separated from a loved one in their lives. For me, I am not concerned with what your political stance is on any of this; to see a family split apart breaks my heart. In this ministry, I try to do whatever I can to help people get through the pain of loss they experience in their lives, for those who are being deported and those who are left behind.

The second ministry for which I am responsible is to teach at the University of St. Francis. Starting next week, the folks at the university have tacked on a third course for me to teach as opposed to the two I normally facilitate. The reason I am teaching three courses is because one of the



religious sisters who normally teaches at the university departed USF at the last minute and the head of the theology department needed someone to cover the specialized course the sister was teaching.

The third ministry for which I am responsible is serving as administrator of the three parishes where I am preaching this weekend. St. Anne's Church is home to a national shrine which few in the region are aware even exists within the diocese. St. Patrick's Church in Momence has a plethora of Hispanics who live in the area but have no place to worship in a language or culture that is comfortable to them. In Momence, I have been asked to rebuild the parish, start Hispanic Ministry and deal with all kinds of building issues that need to be addressed.

Then there is the Sacred Heart Mission in Hopkins Park. As you know, the Pembroke Township is one of the poorest counties in Illinois, an extremely desolate place to live. Every time I drive my car out of the town, I have to get a car wash because the roads are mostly dirt. The Rev. Jesse Jackson was in the area two weeks ago because he has been trying to get gas lines put into the city since the region has no gas or basic utilities. The

county has very limited GPS and practically no internet or Wi-Fi of any distinction.

So, with all of these ministries taking place, I realized at Christmastime that I had to bring out my guitar to draw folks back into the parish and help build parish spirit in a way that I could, based on my talents and gifts. As a result, the collections at the three parishes came out rather nicely and I was extremely pleased with the people's generosity.

By the time we reached the end of Christmas (and this happens to me pretty much every year), I am pretty much shot. I always get sick after Christmas because as soon as I let my guard down, all of a sudden, the viruses of life find a way to bring me down. As a lesson well-learned from my past, I often take a week off after Christmas to try and recharge the batteries.

As you know, my way of getting way of staying away from the parish life is to jump on a cruise ship (I know... what a terrible life). I end up serving as a chaplain on a cruise ship because I am guaranteed not to swim back to the parish. Once on a cruise ship, I am forced not to do anything for a week;

all I do on the cruise ship is sleep, eat and walk aimlessly around without any worries whatsoever.

As chaplain on the ship, I celebrate one mass a day. Those folks who work on the ship get a mass of 11:15 on Sunday night that I celebrate. In addition to the Masses, I make myself available if someone needs confessions or anything special; I am more than happy to help them out. For my part, I just need the warm weather, to relax, calm down and all that stuff.

On this particular cruise, one couple wanted to celebrate their 30th anniversary at a weeknight Mass, so they brought their family with them on this special occasion, which I was most happy to accommodate. At the Masses, I pray for loved ones who are sick, those who have died and those who have items they want blessed or confessions they want heard as we dine together on the Lido Deck (I guess I'll hear confessions anywhere...).

On these ships, I have learned that the folks working the crew originate from different parts of the world, whether it be from South Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, Uruguay, or wherever else you can imagine. On this particular cruise, there was one staff person whose family lived in

Serbia. He asked to meet with me one night, sharing that he was really having a hard time on the ship. Now when you are a crew person working far away from your family, you sign a contract that often keeps you away from the ones you love for four, six, eight months or even a year. Now if you are middle-aged or younger and you are away from your family for long periods of time, this separation can be extremely difficult, especially if you become homesick.

For this particular crewman, he was separated from a wife and two small children and the roof of his house in Serbia literally was falling apart. This worker really was struggling on the job because he really just did not feel comfortable being away from his family so long and it was affecting his job performance. The man lamented as to how he would overcome his depression and poor job performance – what could he do to change his disposition?

When someone poses this type of dilemma to me, I always refer back to Paul's letter to the Colossians (specifically 3: 17), where I paraphrase, "whatever you do, in word and in work, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus." Whatever vocation you are called to live and if you are doing this vocation

to support your family and your community, then do it out of love. When you are doing the job – making a bed, cleaning the dishes, fixing a table, serving food, working behind the desk – every time you are fulfilling the tasks for which you are I responsible, I encourage the crew worker to think about the people that they are serving, the people who are going on a vacation to get away from their own daily grinds of life and are looking for a way to relax. I encourage the worker to think about the family for which they are providing at home, wherever in the world they may be and how this work benefits their well-being.

When crew workers question their purpose on the ship, I encourage them to think about God who is willing to sacrifice the divine life in order to become incarnate in the world for us to have a chance for salvation, to leave the perfection of heaven, to come down on earth. I encourage the worker to think about all the sacrifices made in the bible and how, in some little way, the worker is modeling the divine sacrifice that weaves itself through the story of faith. I tell the worker that no matter what task one has on the ship, if it is done with a loving heart, it does not matter task one is assigned on the ship. One can serve as the captain or the cook or the

cabin or dining room steward. If the vocation is offered out of love, and one allows the task to be completed with the love of God in one's heart, every ministry can be a sacred one.

The same theory could apply to every person in this room. Whatever you do, in word and in work, if you do it with love in your heart and with God in your heart, every single one of you, no matter who you are or what you do in life, your presence could be a very sacred one wherever you are.

Maybe the words I offered helped the worker from Serbia – maybe it did not – but certainly this believe is something I keep deep in my heart as a Christian. As a Catholic priest, I certainly think that by making a parallel sacrifice in my own parishes and helping you all out from this belief system, I hope I am modeling the example that Christ offers in that nativity and certainly on that cross. If I set the example for you and you do the same from me, we all benefit from this.

So, I am finishing the cruise and on Saturday night I was picked up at the airport by a cab drive to take me back to my house in St. Anne. I came to find out that the taxi driver was an extremely religious man who found out that I was a priest. Once I told him this, all he wanted to do was talk about

religion. (This is the problem when some find out you are a priest – all of a sudden, some change their disposition in the conversation and every sentence begins or ends with “yes father” or “no father” or “whatever you want ,father.”

So, in the course of this trip, my cab driver began to ask me about the Catholic faith versus the Protestant faith from which he belonged. The driver said he once talked to a Catholic religious sister and he did not comprehend the kind of life this woman chose to follow. As a result, the cab driver asked me, “How can a woman or a man in the Catholic Church give up all these things to be with God in this particular way?”

My response to him (maybe it was not the best response; at 11:00 p.m., all I want to do is sleep!) was that whatever vocation you choose in life, eventually you have to make sacrifices. Is this not true? If you get married, you are saying you are dedicated to one person and one person only; in this vocation, this other person becomes the most important person of your life. This is not saying that you do not care about anyone else, but in the context of marriage you commit yourself to be devoted specifically and most importantly to one person. In marriage, you are supposed to engage

in a vocation to devote your life primarily to your spouse and the family that you want to raise together. As a Catholic vocation, you are committing yourself to treat the other as more important than your own life itself and you are willing to sacrifice your life for the sake of the other.

I believe this same theory applies to a priest and/or a religious brother or sister. In our respective vocations, we make certain sacrifices because these sacrifices are part of the vocation that we choose to live, the ministry which God has asked us to live, that nothing is more important than taking care of the people that we are commissioned to serve. In my case, this means I sacrifice my well-being in order to take care of all of you.

If you are a religious sister or brother, usually you take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. With the Poor Clare Sisters to whom I minister, in addition to these they take the vows of silence and cloister. All of this may seem a little extreme to other people – it certainly did to the taxi driver – but I have learned in these cases and in my own life, the more you sacrifice, the more you can devote yourself to focus on the vocation that you are called to serve.

That said, please reflect upon this on this Solemnity of the Epiphany... God chooses to leave a perfect existence and comes down to earth to assume a human will and a human nature as a child. This God-child has to deal with all the things that are human, starting with living as a very humble, vulnerable child.

In this course of the God-child's existence, we listen to a story these wise men (not necessarily three and certainly not kings, according to Matthew's gospel). These wise men, these astrologers from the east arrive at this house to present to this God-child three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. As I tell this story to parents (or in this case, a cab drive), I present this parallel scenario to them...

I come to your baby's baptism and I decide to bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts. I tell you that gold is the symbol for kings, a symbol of royalty. In the New Testament, we are taught that Jesus is the king; Jesus is the new Messiah. In the Old Testament, the Messiah was a political figure who was meant to reunite Jerusalem just the way it was in the era of King David. As we learn in Christianity, the Messiah-king from the New

Testament is the one who would lead us to the New Jerusalem, the kingdom of heaven.

At this baptism, I bring you the gift of frankincense. Frankincense is a symbol of holiness. When we pray, the smoke from the incense symbolizes our prayers rising to God. With this gift, we acknowledge the holiness of the child in front of us and pray to God that this holiness be revealed and lifted up in a life well-lived.

With these first two gifts, we acknowledge that a child is part of royalty and we got holiness. Then there is myrrh...

Let us say I bring myrrh to your baby's baptism. Myrrh is a pickling spice that is used for somebody after their death. Essentially with this gift for your baby's baptism, I am giving you something to prepare your child for burial after your baby is **dead**. I have given you spices to prepare your child when they are dead. Think about that...

What would you do to me if I sincerely presented you a gift like that at a baby's baptism? ***You would kick me out of the house!!!*** So why would the wise men bring pickling spices for the future burial of an infant?

The answer to that question presents the theme of why became incarnate – Jesus became incarnate and was presented the gift of myrrh so that the nativity and the cross are directly related. The wise men are forecasting what this child is going to do for the salvation of the world by dying on that cross. We learn from this story, from the sacrifice of this child’s particular vocation, that if the child does not come down and assume a human will and a human nature, there is no way for the rest of us to get to heaven. By forecasting what this child is going to do for the sake of humanity, the wise men are telling us that this child has a purpose in life that could not be fulfilled by those characters from the Old Testament who certainly were not obedient to God. The wise men revealed that this “Son of God” would be able to say yes where the rest of us could not and because he said yes, we all have a chance for salvation.

Now I am telling this story to the guy in the cab and you know this is not easy stuff to fathom (this is what you get for keeping me up after 11:00 p.m.!!!). What I presented was highly theological, but the whole reason we are here... yes, it is pretty to look at the nativity and the Christmas trees and all the decorations, but once we realize why this Christ-child, this God-

man, this Messiah is doing what he is doing and the sacrifice he is willing to make so that we can get to heaven, hopefully that inspires us to do the same thing for families and our community and our church, maybe even on a cruise ship and a taxi cab. For this reason, I find hope in my vocation and hope in my life.

By taking some time away on vacation to recharge the batteries, I get a little breath and a little refresher to remind myself of why I am doing what I am doing as a priest. Hopefully, all of you can understand the same message from this Epiphany story and realize why you are called to do what God asks you to do in your respective vocations as well. Let us all take a moment to think about what our vocation is and what God is calling us to do. Let us pray for our families. Let us pray for our community. Let us pray for the people in our parish who are our brothers and sisters in the faith. Let us ask God to give us strength to do what is right in the vocation we have been called to live and let us share that life with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.