

Homily
Epiphany - C
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
January 5-6, 2019

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

So every year around Christmastime, I used to have a tradition of inviting the members of our RCIA Process or the kids of our school together for a Christmas Party and a Christmas Quiz. During this quiz, I ask them a series of questions that pretty much obliterate the popular understanding of our Christmas traditions and, in the process, pretty much depress the life of those who take the quiz. Since we are all just about at the end of our Christmas Season as well, I felt it appropriate to depress all of you as well with a shortened version of the quiz, so let's see if you can answer these ten questions:

1. True or False: The Solemnity of Christmas has always been celebrated on December 25th. **False** - *not until the 4th Century did it settle on the 25th of December. Other dates were accepted before that.*
2. True or False: In some parts of the world, the Solemnity of the Christmas used to be celebrated on January 6th. **True** - the Gregorian Calendar (which is used in today's society) places Christmastime around December 25th - the Julian Calendar (which was used prior to the 4th Century or thereabouts) placed Christmastime on January 6th. Today, the entire Christian world celebrates Christmas on December 25th except the Church of

Armenia (which still celebrates Christmas on January 6th).

3. In which two gospels do we find the Christmas story so that we can answer all these questions accurately? *Matthew & Luke* (and the story of the wise men is found only in Matthew's account).
4. After Jesus' birth, he was placed in a manger. What exactly is a manger?
 - a) A stable for domestic animals
 - b) A wooden hay storage bin
 - c) **A feeding trough.**
 - d) A barn
5. According to the Bible, who saw the "star in the east"?
 - a) Shepherds
 - b) Mary and Joseph
 - c) Three kings
 - d) **None of the above** – this is a trick question; the wise men were not necessarily seen as three or as kings.
6. In Biblical Literature, what is a "wise man"? How many wise men came to Bethlehem? What were their names? *In the bible, a "wise man" refers to an astrologer of the first century. The Gospel of Matthew does not provide us with their names or the number of wise men from the East.*

7. "Frankincense" is:
- a) a precious metal
 - b) a precious fabric
 - c) ***a precious perfume*** – *Frankincense was a fragrant perfume used during coronations of kings and other significant events of the time.*
 - d) a fairy tale
 - e) none of the above
8. "Myrrh" is:
- a) an easily shaped metal
 - b) ***a spice used for burying people*** – *see Jn 19:39.*
 - c) a drink
 - d) after-shave lotion
 - e) none of the above
9. According to the Bible, the wise men stopped in Jerusalem...
- a) to inform Herod about Jesus
 - b) ***to find out where Jesus was*** – *see Mt 2: 1-2.*
 - c) to ask about the star they saw
 - d) for gas
 - e) to buy presents for Jesus
10. According to Matthew's gospel, the wise men found Jesus in a:
- a) Manger
 - b) Stable
 - c) ***House*** – *see Mt 2: 11.*
 - d) Holiday Inn
 - e) Good Mood

EXTRA CREDIT: What was the name of the pastor from St. Dominic's Church in the movie, "Going My Way"? (this is the

quintessential Christmas movie for any good Catholic). Hint: he was played by Barry Fitzgerald, not Bing Crosby. *Fr. Fitzgibbons* (Bing Crosby played *Fr. Chuck O'Malley*).

Now this quiz might sound all nice and fun (at least to those who didn't fail it), but to understand truly what was at stake at this Epiphany and what these astrologers sacrificed for the sake of our salvation was something to behold. As we have just seen, the pretty Epiphany image that has been painted for us by popular culture is not necessarily the one that actually took place. Scholars tell us that these astrologers, of whose names and numbers we do not know, most likely traveled for two whole years in their quest to find this new King of the Jews. The journey did not take place without peril; the encounter between the wise men and Herod (and Herod's subsequent response) did not rest well with the wise men, who did not return to Herod as they had planned to do originally.

The men met this child after the child turned two and immediately these men recognized that this star had led them to the new king of Israel. Although scripture scholars do not associate great symbolic value

to the gifts that the magi presented the Lord, nevertheless, the type of gifts given by the astrologers were of great kingly value: the gold can be understood as a symbol of power, the frankincense as a symbol of kingship and the myrrh as a precursor for what was yet to come, a spice used during the burial rites of kings.

In my prayer life, I took this symbolism one step further, in light of the Christmas reading from Saturday morning's early Mass. I reflected on the fifth chapter of John's first letter and I began to connect the paschal mystery with the three gifts from God presented by this most favored apostle: the Spirit, water, and blood. According to the interpretation of biblical scholars, the gift of the Holy Spirit can be found most visibly at Christmas time during the feast of the annunciation, the moment that the power of the Holy Spirit filled the womb of the Blessed Mother at the time of the Lord's conception. The gift of water reminds us of the feast we will celebrate on Monday, the feast of the Lord's baptism, a gift of water that cleanses all of us from Original Sin and purifies our souls so that we may see the Lord. The gift of blood, synonymous with the gift of myrrh, reminds us that the incarnation of

the Lord was the necessary first step of Jesus' journey to Calvary, where he shed his blood for the salvation of all.

If we understand in our spiritual journey about the importance of these gifts from Matthew's gospel of gold, frankincense and myrrh, if we understand the gifts from St. John's first letter of the Holy Spirit, water and blood, it is then that we come to understand the true meaning of Christmas – that Jesus Christ entered the world to send us the Spirit, to cleanse us with the waters of rebirth, and to shed his blood on the cross so that his followers would not have to pay the price for their sinful nature in the next world.

We know from our traditions that the Feast of the Epiphany has more meaning in some cultures than Christmas itself. Some cultures still recognize the Feast of the Epiphany as the *true Christmas*, as the day that the magi reveal the Christmas message through the gifts they presented to our God. Epiphany becomes a time, in some cultures, as an opportunity for families to pass out earthly gifts to each other as a symbol of the spiritual gifts that have been revealed to us in the readings scripture this weekend. For these cultures, it is not good

enough to just accept this child's presence in their lives on his day of birth; today this revelation is made known of this child-king and for this gift we truly give thanks. We recognize that this child will be the one who will lead us to the new Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, and the place of heaven where they will find peace.

If we understand what those before us have sacrificed to follow the king, then we are obligated to sacrifice as well. To celebrate Christmas is one thing; to accept and follow the teachings of our king is a completely different story. Many people around the world celebrate Christmas without any understanding as to the import of its meaning. If we wish to embrace the spirit of Christmas in a true sense, then we must also allow ourselves to be led by the king and Church that this king has instituted. We are taught that the Holy Spirit directs the Church, a Spirit which gives this breath and life to this young king of Christmastime.

May we take time during our holiday season to learn better the traditions and histories of our Christian faith life. May we teach these values to the kids of the next generation. May we live the message of this king and may we be led by this king so that the message of this season of Christ's coming may not be a message given in vain. This is our prayer.