

SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD
JANUARY 4/5, 2014

A well-circulated Hasidic tale tells the story of a rabbi quizzing his students. He asked, “How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?”

One of the students suggested, “Day begins when, from a distance, you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep.”

“No,” answered the rabbi. Another student asked, “Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?”

Again the answer was, “No.” “Please tell us the answer then,” said the students.

“It is,” said the rabbi, “when you can look into the face of other human beings and you have enough light in you to recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Up until then, it is night, and darkness is still with us.”

The celebration of Epiphany is the joyous realization that God has manifested the good light of forgiveness and redemption in our world. As we celebrate this feast, we are to recognize and realize its challenge: to be living reflections of the light of Christ for all people; to see in the face of each human being a particular manifestation of the miracle of the Incarnation, God become flesh today as surely as God became flesh in our world a little over two thousand years ago.

Epiphany celebrates the universal offer of God’s saving love in Jesus. As Pope Francis has made so astoundingly clear by his words and gestures, no one regardless of race, class or life circumstance should ever feel themselves, much less be made to feel especially by members of the Church, that they are unworthy, unloved, that they stand outside the scope of God’s redemptive love in Jesus. The persons of the Magi, traditionally depicted as representing different races or nationalities represent this universal offer of divine grace. They also are a visible representation of the make-up of we, the People of God, who constitute the Church.

The Church in our country, as is our country as a whole, is experiencing a period of change, as immigrants especially from Latin and South America make their way to our states, towns, parishes and neighborhoods, even as for many of us, our ancestors did from Europe over a century ago. How we view and treat these brothers and sisters tells much of our understanding and practice of God's universal plan of salvation and our being church.

Do we harbor bias towards Hispanic immigrant members of the Church in our country and here at St. Cecilia? Are our attitudes and actions shaped by the Scriptures clear message of compassion for the immigrant or by portrayals offered by popular culture or the characterizations of some politicians or political commentators? Do we see the face of Jesus in them?

Broadening our vision beyond our Hispanic brothers and sisters, what about our attitudes and words about other persons who are different from us in society, in the Church, in our parish? Do we see, speak and act toward them as we are; children of God created in the divine image and likeness, bearing the mystery of the Incarnation of the Jesus? Do we ever tell and laugh at ethnic jokes, or jokes that ridicule or demean the dignity of persons who are different than we are by race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or life style? To what extent are our church attitudes and contacts "segregated" by "right theology/orthodoxy" in regard to church teaching and practice as we choose to understand it? Where in our lives do we need to grow in the understanding and practice of Gospel hospitality as modeled by Pope Francis?

The feast of the Epiphany provides us with a lovely tableau of streaming nations, of stars and kings bearing valuable gifts with which to honor Jesus, child of Mary, Son of God. But that tableau can only come to life if each of us risks reaching out to another and values the other as a beloved child of God and a brother and sister. Every person whom God puts on our path is **both a gift and an opportunity**—a **gift** because they carry within them the precious light of God's love; an **opportunity** because they enable us to make the challenge of Epiphany real and practical enabling us to determine the dawn of the light of salvation in the world, the church and our individual life.