

**The Epiphany of the Lord
January 8, 2012
4PM and 5:30 PM Liturgies**

The feast we celebrate today, the Solemnity of the Epiphany, has a complex and fascinating history. But like so much in the Christmas narratives, there are really two stories here. One is a clear and relatively simple celebration of the strange group of people whom St. Matthew describes as the Magi visiting Mary and Jesus. This has become part of the story that appeals especially to children (there are always three “kings” to complete the pageant festivities). Even though we don’t really know what the term *magus* really means (the Greek from which Magi comes). We don’t know if there were three (that only comes into lore because there are three gifts mentioned). We don’t really know their names (again a later tradition). We only know they are strangers “from the East.”

But we do know that theologically the Magi are more than they seem to be. There is another story being told here.

The other story is much more complex and challenging: it tells of the radical departure from the Jewish conviction that the Messiah would be sent only to the people of Israel. If you listened carefully to all of today’s readings, it is clear that we celebrate a Lord given to *all* the nations and we witness in the Magi *gentiles* inheriting God’s kingdom from the very beginning of Jesus’

life. These are strangers, the outsiders, the “others,” not part of “us.”

It seems that development in faith starts very early in the young Christian community. And the early question that remains into today’s church is: how do you maintain continuity as you develop theologically? This is the complex and serious challenge in today’s celebration.

Nowhere is this dilemma more clear than today’s second reading where St. Paul (or a close associate of Paul’s) summarizes Paul’s whole life of ministry in these words: what has been revealed, “manifested” this day is “that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” That’s Paul describing his *whole life* as an Apostle! That is Paul’s early gift to the developing church.

Both Isaiah and Psalm 72 repeat the refrain: every nation on earth will adore you....and caravans of camels shall fill you proclaiming the praises of the Lord.

Not everyone saw things this way. It is only thanks to Paul’s preaching—and his preaching so successfully even to Peter, James and the others in Jerusalem—that God’s gift in Jesus is for everyone: not for some, or for many, but for all!

The earliest church community changed one of its most cherished

traditions within a few decades. In the very first confrontation with “the other,” (those estranged, or just strange, those on the far horizons of the new church), in that early battle, “the other” wins. *All* are to be welcomed without prejudice! And that meant *all* in those days! Just ask St. Paul—or St. Peter for that matter!

Jesus is revealed to “the *nations*” today—not just to Israel. And our own welcome to the strangers, to the “other” in our communities some 2000 years later, can be no less complete. (You figure out who today’s “others” are. Who are today’s public sinners? Where are today’s prostitutes? Who are the strangers and foreigners in our midst? All I can assure you is they are plentiful.) This is the challenge of today’s feast!

Times change. Circumstances change. People change. So there is always a need for development. But how to preserve continuity at the same time? There’s the nub of it all. The church’s challenge from the very beginning has been how to keep embracing the “other” in our midst and how to embrace them fully into our life and community.

Poet and novelist Patricia Hampl captures this dilemma of the “other” in the early church so well. She writes: “The most ancient and heroic (if sometimes shameful) struggle of the church is not with “change” but with

“the other.” This drama first plays out in Paul’s letters, among the earliest documents of our tradition. The very nature of Paul’s radical apostolic mission meant that abhorrent practices—eating defiled meat, sharing table with pagans, releasing converts from the requirement of circumcision—had to be, as people say today, revisited. Paul at Antioch and the leadership in Jerusalem had a hard time keeping it together. In a sense, they settled for a geographic détente—Paul’s multicultural solutions (eat the meat, lose the sacramental surgery) [worked] in distant Asia Minor, [and] a stricter adherence to received forms [worked] in Jerusalem.”

Now remember that St. Matthew already knew of Paul’s preaching and his apostolic life by the time Matthew wrote this gospel. That explains today’s story of the Magi. Sometimes Magi are more than they seem to be.

Paul Baumann, the editor of Commonweal magazine, said recently: “Catholicism has altered seemingly irreformable teachings on more than a few occasions over the centuries (baptizing the uncircumcised, the perfidy of the Jews, slavery, usury, separation of church and state) yet somehow found a way to move forward with its identity, focus, and integrity in tact....”

It all begins with the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. Sometimes Magi are more than what they seem to be. Enjoy what’s left of the

liturgical Christmas season! There's only one more day left!