

Epiphany, January 8, 2012. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan

All kinds of questions get asked about Epiphany. When children hear that it's called Little Christmas they ask excitedly, does this mean more presents? (In some countries, yes!). Others say, who are these astrologers? And how come they are called that now when they used to be called the Wise Men? Some want to know: did all this really happen anyway; isn't this story what scholars call a *midrash*? And one more question: Did the Holy Family sell those expensive gifts to pay for their trip to Egypt? (This was once advanced as a possibility!)

We don't ask the right questions. *This is the story of a journey. And a search.* Who is really making the journey? We are. It's called life. And like those special excursion flights on airlines, we have to return to the point of origin – which is called God.

In the search for God we have to help each other. There is a Hasidic story about a man who was lost in the forest for three days, and about to despair of ever finding his way. Then he hears another person approaching and his heart leaps with hope. "You can rescue me," he said, "for I am lost!" But the newcomer said, "I, too, am lost. **But at least I know some ways that you should not go.** Come, take my hand, and let us make our way together." We are actually better off than that. The wise men did not make the search alone; they were a community of three, perhaps more. We are more than three; we are a community of faith called the church. And the church is the guardian of the scriptures and of the tradition that tells God's story and helps us in many ways to enter his presence, especially through the Eucharist, the Mass.

When a group of children were asked where Jesus would be living if he were born again tonight, they mentioned places like these: Some said in the desert, thinking of solitude. Others said, no, in the city, where the people are. The biggest answer was among the poor. In the barrios and favelas (the names of the slums in the Third World). Or in the hospitals and places where people are suffering. And a few said, in the nursery, where the infants have just been born.

We read or hear the scriptures, but you don't find God in a book. What you find is *meaning to life*, sense to existence, a constant revelation that what is behind it all is not blind power but beautiful, even radiant and personal love. This is what the scriptures *tell* you and what Jesus makes believable. Then you wait for it to "ring true" in your own experience.

The gospel of Epiphany can also serve as a warning. There were *two* sets of Wise Men. We all know about the Three Kings. The *other* Wise Men were the chief priests and scribes of the people, whom Herod summoned to ask where the Messiah was to be born. They gave the right answer; "In Bethlehem of Judah, O King" but did nothing more. They were not interested. Herod did not find him because his heart was darkened.

T.S. Eliot said in a memorable line that our whole life is a journey that brings us back to where we started from, with this difference: we recognize it for the first time. Does that mean that God is everywhere, even if we did not know it at the time? Yes. An old man

said, "I am going back to where I came from," and his friend asked, "Do you mean the old country?" "No," he said, "I came from God and I am returning to God." He's right. Along the way we have guardian angels, patron saints, loving parents, siblings, friends - and all these can reveal the presence of God in our lives. **Whatever light has shone in our own darkness is a light from beyond. Whatever love has guided and protected us is part of the divine love. In the end it calls us home.**