

I have a confession to make. I'm not a big fan of Christmas pageants. I mean, I love seeing kids get involved with our storytelling, and to see how adorable it is, and I have loads of pictures that I treasure of some very memorable pageants, but I still have some problems with pageants. I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact that as a priest's kid, I was (ahem) "encouraged" to participate in a lot more pageants than I was comfortable with.

The reason I'm uncomfortable with them is actually theological, it's that they jumble up two stories, stories that are distinct and separate, and they mix them into one story. The first story is the Christmas story: the story of Jesus' birth in a stable, of angels coming and singing the good news to the shepherds that God had finally acted decisively on behalf of the poor, the weak, and the excluded. The Christmas story is told to us by St. Luke, and no one else! Luke's gospel was written as good news for the poor, the weak, and the excluded, and He shows us a Jesus who heals and empowers the powerless to take God's message and His love all over the world. The second story is the Epiphany story, the story we celebrate today. The story of people who didn't know God, but who looked for God, finding an irrefutable sign that God was acting in the world, and that He wanted to draw all the nations in to see what He was doing to fulfill His promises and to bring His message and His love to them. The Epiphany story is told by St. Matthew, and no one else! Matthew's gospel was written to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy, and the extension of the God's promises to Israel to the rest of the whole world. Two stories, told by two different storytellers, to two different audiences, to make two different, but similar points. If that comes as a surprise to you, then you'll understand why I wonder about Christmas pageants sometimes.

The story of the magi is often confused in people's minds because of this. We sing about three wise men, but the Gospel doesn't tell us how many seekers there are, or that they were kings, or even what their gender is, it only tells us that *magoi*—magicians or sages—come, and that there are three symbolic gifts. Gifts that symbolize Jesus being God, and King, and human all at once; gifts that symbolize our whole lives, and the resources of the whole world. When we hear about them right after the story of the shepherds, we often suppose that they are there to provide a bit of balance: that first the poor, and then the rich, get to come and adore Jesus; or that first the Jews, and then the Gentiles get to worship Him—but none of that is in the story at all.

I've even heard this feast of the Epiphany denounced as "exclusive" and "elitist", because these rich people come and bring posh and expensive gifts that most people couldn't afford. How are we to follow that example? How are we supposed to live up to that? But anytime someone interprets the Gospel as 'exclusive' or 'elitist', we should know that something's wrong, because the Gospel is intended to be inclusive, and for everyone, and to interpret it any other way is misleading. This feast, this epiphany, and the revealing and dawning that we celebrate, far from being exclusive, is among one of the most inclusive messages in the Bible. The visit from these sages shows us that Christ really is for all people everywhere, not just us; it shows us that everyone, from every

culture and background can find the signs of God's love in the world around them; it shows us that this Jesus we love and worship isn't some religious or theological idea that we have to convince other people of, but that He is what every part of creation longs for and seeks, whether they know Him by that Name or not.

This is part of what we have come to believe as Christians, not that we have a monopoly on God, or that ours is the only path to Him, but that Christ is found on the path of every human life. We believe that Christ is the only way to the Father, but we also believe that Christ is present in all parts of God's creation, that all truth points to Him, that true love leads to Him, and that signs of this are to be found in every part of creation: the blades of grass, the flakes of snow, the ocean depths, the mountain heights, and even the stars of the sky. We profess this belief every week when we say that "we believe in Jesus Christ...through whom all things were made." In last week's gospel, we heard St. John affirm this when he told us that Jesus is the Word of God, and that "without Him, was not anything made that was made." That is the good news, that's the inclusive message of the Gospel that we celebrate today, that through Christ—mystical and universal, God can be found by any and all who seek after Him.

Matthew's story is about people who had no exposure to God, or to the relationship that God had with Israel, no knowledge of the promises that God made to them that one day He would come among them to save and help them. They knew nothing of any of these things. What they did know was that there was beauty in the world, that there was order to nature. They knew that good was preferable to evil, that love and peace were preferable to hatred and violence. They knew that something had set these wheels in motion, and that there was a reason that the world was this way. They knew the same things that most people from most belief systems around the world know, and they tried to make sense of it. Matthew's story is about people who set out on a journey to try to find these answers, people who sought diligently for the missing pieces of the puzzle that the world had laid out for them. Somehow or another, they found each other along the way, and they decided to search together. They taught each other what they knew as they journeyed on together, and shared their experiences. Eventually, they saw something which filled them with joy and wonder: a sign that gave them direction and purpose, a new light that had dawned on the world that illuminated their path. So they ran to it, and prepared the best things they could offer. They followed the signs that they were given and were led to Bethlehem, and there they found a miracle that was beyond their expectation or comprehension: That God, who created the heavens and the earth and all the stars in their vast array, had come among them as a humble child, in real flesh and blood, to pour out His love on anyone who wants it. And they saw him with their own eyes, and they worshipped Him. And it changed everything, it changed their whole lives. The last thing we hear about them is that they 'went home by another road.'

It's the same for us, really. All of us have sensed in our lives that there is something behind the good and the beauty and the love we see in the world. All of us have tried to put the pieces together and figure it out. All of us are on a journey, in search of the answers to those questions. Somehow or another, along the way, we have found each other, and we have decided to continue our journey and search together. As we go on, we

share our experiences and teach each other what we know. And the heart, the high point, of our journey comes in the signs we get that fill us with joy and wonder, the signs that give us direction and purpose, the lights that shine on us to illuminate our path. The signs that point to a miracle beyond our expectation or comprehension: that God Himself, who created the heavens and the earth has come among us in real flesh and blood, to share our lives, and to pour out his grace and love upon us. But we don't meet Him in Bethlehem, sitting on His mother's knee; we meet Him here in Nashua, here at CGS, sitting there on the table He asked us to prepare for Him. And if we let it, that miracle changes everything, it changes our whole lives. It opens up a whole new path for us to follow and a whole new home for us to return to. The question is yours to answer: will you go back by the same old road to the same old patterns and routines? Or will you return by a different road?