

Epiphany 18

1/6/2018

Here in the United States children receive gifts on Christmas, the 25th of December, but in Italy, I am told, children receive gifts on the 6th of January, the feast of the Epiphany. Both customs can offer very good explanations for their existence. We who give gifts on the 25th can say that this is a most appropriate time to do so because Christmas celebrates God's giving us his Son Jesus, the greatest of all gifts we could ever receive. But those who give gifts today, the Feast of the Epiphany, could argue that this is the most appropriate time to do so because today the three magi arrived at the child's home to give him gifts. So those who give gifts today are following the example of the three magi or wise men from the East.

Let us call it a draw and say: it is appropriate to give gifts on both dates. But since Pope Francis lives in Italy, he follows its customs. And so last Friday, the eve of the Epiphany he visited the Bambino Gesu Children Hospital outside Rome which has 120 beds for children. I don't know if he had a gift for each child, but he certainly gifted them in visiting them, speaking to them gently and

kindly and giving them his blessing. In doing this the pope was continuing a custom he initiated during the Year of Mercy, 2015-2016, that of performing an act of charity on Fridays. He called them Mercy Fridays. So his action on January 5th, a Friday, was a continuation of this good habit.

In an article in the NY times this past Friday entitled “How would Jesus drive?” the columnist and author David Brooks complimented the pope for coming up with a beautiful phrase, “the artisans of the common good.” The pope used it in his New Year’s Sermon when he praised people who perform ordinary acts of kindness like visiting the sick and elderly or driving politely. Taking his cue from the pope, Brooks described the world’s driving habits and how one could become an artisan of the common good by driving politely, by driving, as the article’s title says, as Jesus would.

We have put all sorts of “sleazoids” at the top of our society, Brooks writes, but let us not be like them. Instead let us be like the people the pope praises, the artisans of the common good. We can do that in the way we drive. By the way, of the five places in the country where drivers have more accidents, three of them are here in little old MA: Boston, Worcester and Springfield. The other

two are Baltimore and Washington, DC. “Way to go, MA,” Brooks quips.

Years ago when I was living in Philadelphia, a fellow Jesuit said to me as I was driving: “You don’t use direction signals.” I am sure that I denied his statement, but he was with me while I was driving. Just the other day I was very angry here at the light just beyond the church on Commonwealth Ave. I thought I was in the correct lane, but some jerk was squeezing me out of it on my right. I now realize that what is the center light at the light becomes the left lane after the light. Yes, you knew that already. Some of us are slow learners. Maybe my Boston driving background is still there.

But we should not concentrate on such small matters. It is Epiphany, and Epiphany celebrates the world’s discovery of its savior, Jesus. The magi are non-Jews. Their coming to the Lord symbolizes the world’s coming to Jesus. As you well know, the early church began as a Jewish community and struggled with the acceptance of non-Jews into itself. Some thought non-Jews would have to become Jews. Gentile men, for example, would have to be circumcised. In the end, that position was rejected. Indeed, in the end the community became exclusively non-Jewish, and then

centuries later came the shameful history of the church's terrible treatment of people simply because they were Jewish.

Therefore, it is good for us to learn once again the primary lesson of this feast of the Epiphany: the Lord Jesus is there for the whole world. It doesn't matter whether one is Jew or Gentile. We repeat to ourselves once again those challenging words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." But the next sentence tells us that if we belong to Christ, we have all become Jews, because we have become descendants of Abraham, heirs to the promise. Our faith in God's promises makes us like Abraham and therefore Jews. And our first reading for today sees that universal faith envisaged in Isaiah's words: "Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance."

But we still have work to do to keep up with St. Paul's categories. We are now at sea about gender, and in ways that were unimaginable less than a century ago. And some believe that behind the success of President Trump's election victory there was a white racism, that some voted for him because they saw him as the defender of white people against Latino and black people.

Some of us who are white find that hard to believe. Racism is behind us, we think. Hence our surprise when racial slurs appear on BC's campus. They may be the work of a small minority. But we have to look again into our own hearts and our day-to-day practices to make sure that we do not share that small minority's prejudices.

We began talking about driving and the pope's beautiful phrase, "artisans of the common good." That was good. Let us be such by performing the ordinary acts of goodness and kindness which hold our society together, and that includes the way we drive. But we cannot forget those fundamental attitudes which govern our thinking and acting, which affect the way we look at each other as male and female and as white, brown, yellow or black. With the grace of God, may we become artisans of the common good there as well.