

Epiphany Sunday
01/07/18

The bishops of Minnesota have asked that we celebrate this weekend as Immigration Sunday, with a theme of *Share the Journey*. But before I get into that, let me set the record straight when it comes to the Feast of the Epiphany.

We will soon be singing the famous hymn for today, We Three Kings of Orient Are. And I am not in any way going to suggest that we not sing it; to be honest, when I asked Kim if it was on the list for today, she said in a strong voice, “Of course! Should we NOT sing it?” I assured her we should – after all, it will be sung in churches all over the world this weekend. But there are some things in the song that don’t jive with the Gospel passage.

First, we don’t know if there were three people involved, let alone three kings. Some speculate there were many or they wouldn’t have been granted an audience with Herod. We assume there were three because there were three gifts. But they were most likely not Kings per se. Matthew tells us they were Magi, who were followers of Zoroaster, an Iranian-speaking prophet. And the idea behind the legend of kings comes from how expensive the gifts were.

We also tend to put the wise men at the manger, just as they are in our Gathering Space, when in fact, they would have visited Jesus when he was around 2 years old. Matthew says the Magi entered “the house” and saw “the child”; therefore their visit didn’t happen until well after the birth. Which makes sense, since Herod almost immediately gave the order to have the male children two years old and younger killed. Now that I have you completely confused and maybe doubting the whole story, let’s get back to Immigration Sunday.

St. Mother Teresa once said that “Charity begins today. Today somebody is suffering, today somebody is in the street, today somebody is hungry. Our work is for today, yesterday has gone, tomorrow has not yet come. Today – do not wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow might not come. Tomorrow we will not have them if we do not feed them today.”

Jesus says much the same thing at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me. And when His disciples said they didn’t remember helping Him, He said that whenever we help the least, we help Him. And He didn’t qualify it. Anytime we help the least, we help Him.

I would be foolish if I imagined everyone here thought it was a good idea to welcome each and every immigrant. Some would say those without documentation should be sent home. I have to admit that's what I thought until I researched the issue a little further. You see, we have to remember that Jesus was a refugee, an immigrant of sorts.

As a child, He fled to Egypt with His parents, to avoid the terror of Herod. And we certainly can't forget that He was an itinerant, moving from place to place with, as Matthew puts it, nowhere to lay His head. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says the Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, copartners in the promise, and while this may not seem like a big deal to us in IGH in 2018, back then it was huge.

Recall that virtually all of the first Christians were Jews. The question then became whether Gentiles had to become Jews first, before they became Christians. Again, to us, this might seem like a minor issue but to the first Christians, it was anything but minor. In fact, it was a stumbling block in the relationship between Peter and Paul.

But, you say, this is different. The new wave of immigrants are taking jobs away and they're not paying any taxes. And it seems like there are more immigrants than locals. Well, both of those statements are false. All immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, pay taxes: income, sales, and/or property taxes. And, hard as it might be to believe, in Minnesota, only 6% of the population is foreign-born. In 1890, that number was 40%.

The bottom line is that no one should feel like a stranger in the church. No one. If we are not welcoming, we are not Christian. As the Minnesota bishops said in their statement on immigration, we are called to recognize Christ in every newcomer and to respect the dignity of all human beings, regardless of their legal status. The bishops said further that a just and equitable immigration policy would, among other things: recognize the inherent dignity of every human being; seek to reunite, stabilize and strengthen families; ease the path to citizenship; and provide access to basic necessities. The bishops also oppose policies and practices that separate families and fuel suspicion, fear, intimidation, hatred and violence.

Charity begins today for tomorrow might not come. For, whatever we do and however we act toward the least among us, we do to and act toward Christ. We are all co-heirs, members of the same body, co-partners in the promise. All of us. It's as simple as that.