

A man dies, and at the heavenly gate, St. Peter asks him, "What is your religion?" The man says, "Baptist." St. Peter runs through his book, and says, "You have a room on the fourth floor, but be very quiet as you pass by the ground floor."

Another man arrives. St. Peter asks the same question: "Religion?" "Jewish." "Well, your room is on the third floor but be very quiet as you pass by the ground floor. "

A third man arrives at the gate. "Religion?" "Lutheran." "Go to the fifth floor but be very quiet as you pass by the ground floor."

The man says, "I can understand that there are different floors for different religions, but why must I keep quiet when I pass by the ground floor?" St. Peter explains, "Well, the Catholics are on the ground floor, and they think heaven belongs only to them."

My dear friends, Christmas offers us two of the finest readings in all the New Testament. The first, by St Luke, is the story of the birth of the Messiah; the second is the Gospel of the Epiphany, the three wise men from the East coming to Bethlehem and bearing gifts and paying homage to the Christ Child.

With the celebration of the Epiphany, all the Gentiles of the world can understand that Jesus came, not just for the people of Israel, but for people everywhere. He was to be the Messiah, not only for the Jewish people who had held on to the hope of the Messiah for centuries and centuries; but he had come for us all because "All Lives Matter."

Epiphany means "manifestation." It's a Greek word and it literally means "to draw back the veil" so that what is hidden is made visible. So, whenever you hear of "epiphanies" in the Gospel, it means that God is drawing back the veil that covers a great mystery. Then, all of us peer into this mystery, able to understand much more about who God is and who we are.

And what did the Magi, these three wise men, see? What did they see when the veil of God was drawn back? What they saw was, as Matthew says, the Child with Mary, his Mother. And they fell on their knees and worshipped him.

And then from their treasures, they offered him gold, the symbol of kingship; frankincense, the symbol of the presence of God seen in the perfumed smoke of prayer rising up to heaven; and the final gift was the perfumed oil which was to be used for his burial, and this was the symbol of his great sacrifice: that he would offer up his life in suffering and pain for the redemption of the whole world.

After the Magi paid Him homage, they went home by another way. They did not return to Jerusalem to tell Herod where the Child could be found because they knew that Herod planned to destroy him.

When the Wise Men returned back to their places of origin, they didn't leave Jesus behind. They carried Him in their hearts and proclaimed Him to their own people. Like the Magi, we too come to adore Jesus, our Lord. And we fall on our knees as the Wise Men on their knees, to hear the angel voices proclaiming the coming of the Lord into our present world and into our hearts this evening/morning.

We must remember the coming of Jesus is not a one-time event. He comes each morning to call us to continue our journey with him, following where, He, who is our star, leads us by faith to where He takes us, ultimately taking us home.

And so, when we come each year during Christmas to see the crèche/manger scene, we are reassured that, for the rest of our lives, we too, like Mary, carry Jesus with us and we shall never be separated again.

Last January 1st, we celebrated the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. She carried God Himself in her womb and brought him forth in Bethlehem. And she brought forth Jesus to live with us and to stay with us, to lead us, to care for us, to forgive us, to make sure that we understand the true nature of who/what we are.

For we, like Mary, are the Christ bearers of Jesus, the Savior, sharing Him with everyone that we are with and meet as we walk together the long road with Him, eventually into eternal life.

Through Mary, May the Baby Jesus bless us as we carry Him to our families, neighbors and friends.

Fr Oscar Paraiso