

Homily - Sunday, January 7 – Epiphany of the Lord



While away in Ottawa last week, and staying with my youngest brother, Todd, he introduced me to a wonderful show called *Fake or Fortune*. It's been airing in Britain for about 12 years and has to do with art. (Europeans, in general, have much more of an appreciation for art than we, North Americans, do). I've just seen a couple of episodes, but I'm already hooked. The show deals with ordinary people, like ourselves, who have a piece of art in their possession. What they try to establish is whether or not the art is fake and, therefore, worthless or is a legitimate piece of art that may be worth a fortune. Through in-depth forensic analysis and tons of archival research by art experts the truth of the value of the artwork is revealed at the end of the show. Once the envelope is opened, the person finds out whether their painting, that they picked up randomly at a yard sale 25 years ago for \$5, is still worth \$5 or maybe \$500,000. It's a search for the truth. Even if the art proves to be worthless, I find I have learned so much about art and history in that 1-hour show. Maybe some of us are sitting on a treasure and don't even know it.

The biblical story of the Wisemen is a story of people also searching for the truth. And like the show, *Fake or Fortune*, it's never just a straightforward line to the truth. There are lots of twists and turns, lots of denials, and lots of fear that prevent all of us from seeking and embracing the truth in our own lives, yet the truth remains. Many times in my own life I preferred, foolishly, to be comforted with a lie rather than getting hurt by the truth. In the end the truth will come to the surface, the truth will ultimately be victorious over any lies we've been telling ourselves, and the truth will set us free. Once you know the truth, you can't unknow it. Once you know the truth, any lesser truths almost feel like lies.

In the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah, we heard, ***“Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you and his glory will appear over you.”*** The darkness Isaiah is writing about is the darkness of the Jewish people, our ancestors in faith, who were deported to Babylon in 586 B.C. This was, indeed, a dark time for the Jews. They marched to Babylon, a pagan country ruled by a cruel king. As these Jewish people were led away, with only a few personal belongings, I can’t help but think of how Jews just 80 years ago were led away to Nazi death camps all over Europe.

Isaiah reminded them that while their present pain was real, a deeper truth lay underneath it all. The deeper truth was that God had not abandoned them. Eventually God would lead them home again. Not only would God lead them back to Judah, but God would also lead all nations to the truth. Sons and daughters-- and not just Jewish sons and daughters—entire ***nations will come to your light***. So, ***lift up your eyes*** and see what God is doing for you and what God is doing for the world. This is the universal God who wants to bring all peoples, and not just the Chosen People, home. What’s home? It’s a place of truth, justice, beauty, mercy and forgiveness. It doesn’t ask, nor is it concerned about how you got yourself in this mess in the first place (how you ended up in Babylon); it only say, “Welcome home. All are welcome.”

Truth, like God, is universal. Is there any difference between a devoted Roman Catholic telling you that $2+2=4$ or an atheist tell you? No. It’s still true no matter who tells you. St. Paul wasn’t always a saint. Before he was called Paul, he was Saul of Tarsus, a persecutor of the first generation Christians. In that second letter to the Ephesians, he tells us that a mystery was made known to him by revelation. This is the revelation that changed Paul’s life forever: that God loves the Gentiles (non-Jews) as much as God loves the Jews. God’s love is universal. The followers of Jesus, whom Paul was rounding up to be punished and put to death, were as valuable in the eyes of God as the Jews, the Chosen People. Paul was shocked and relieve to be set free by this truth, the truth that there are no insiders and no outsiders, but that everyone stands on the same ground before God. Everyone gets the same offer, the same help, and the same promise of salvation in Christ Jesus.

The pinnacle of this search for truth, a truth that initially disturbs us before it frees us, comes in the story of the Wisemen. Here's another twist to that story that I've only recently appreciated. Although we are told wisemen came from the East, scholars believe the East refers to Babylon. How ironic. As I mentioned before, in 586 B.C., the Jews were deported to Babylon and suffered there for 50 years under a cruel, pagan king. Wisemen, subject to the king, worked in the king's court and advised him on all kinds of decisions. The Babylonian king decided to listen to their truth or push it aside if it wasn't going to make him look good. How ironic, that wisemen from Babylon, of all places, come to seek out the truth and find it in the Jews, the once persecuted people. I suppose it doesn't matter where truth comes from, for the truth is always the truth. The Magi, from Babylon, left everything to seek the truth.

Nothing in the Magi's past could have prepared them for what they found. With only openness and a star to guide them they found Jesus, the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The Magi came with questions, not with answers. They came with open minds. If they had come looking for a king in a castle, they would have walked right by the manger. Their search would have been fruitless. Openness, not gullibility, is the best gift we can bring to the table if we hope to grow in our faith, if we hope to grow in the truth. Another sign that signifies their openness is that they *opened* their treasure chests. King Herod is doing the opposite; he's shutting everything down. The Magi are opening to life and truth while Herod is closing everything down to the point of killing the newborn baby boys. What Herod can't do is stop God's epiphany, God's revelation.

So it must be with us believers. If we are unwilling to be open, unwilling to be surprised, even disturbed by God, we will miss God. Those who seek to move into God's presence, but only on their own terms, those who claim the right to define what God must be like, where God should be found, how it should feel to be in God's presence, are not searchers at all. That, after all, is idolatry, it is to build our own version of God, not to seek out the true God.

When we seek the truth, and not just our own little truth, there is a sense of transparency, of openness involved with the search. Notice, the conniving Herod has to call a secret meeting. ***(Then Herod secretly called for the wisemen)***. Herod has something to hide; the wisemen have something to find.

The envelope is about to be opened. The truth is about to be revealed. *Fake or Fortune?* The Magi have the good news that what they have in their possession is a Fortune. Only openness to the truth could have gotten them there. It's now our path to follow as well.

~Fr. Phil