

It's always worth acknowledging the way our rites help us understand the Scriptures as they embody the sacred stories and make them come to life, especially in this Christmas season with creches and pageants. Yet, if we want to receive a fresh message from the Bible, we have to be aware that, in the same time, these traditions can sometimes be misleading. It may be particularly true as we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany.

Most of us are well aware of many elements of the tradition in the Epiphany story. The only Gospel account we have of the visit of the Magis is the story we have just heard in Matthew's Gospel. In this story, the wise men have no names yet, we assume there were three based on the number of gifts they offered, but we don't even know who offered what. They certainly weren't on their own but brought caravans with them, and although rich and educated, they probably weren't kings. All of the extra details came later.

Unless we feel very strongly about facts, it does not matter a lot and our appetite for exoticism is satisfied. Yes, it sounds like a fairy tale, yet if fairy tales are stories of love and salvation, then we're spot-on. No, when our tradition starts getting in the way of a clear understanding of the message of Epiphany is if we fail to realize that the visit of the Magis does not come two weeks after Christmas, after the angels and the shepherds are all safely back either to heavens or in their fields. In fact, the story of the Magis is not an after party. What it is is another story of Christmas. Not Luke's version, but Matthew's. There are not mention of angels and shepherds in Matthew, all happen here: Jesus is born from Mary and the Magis visit Jesus.

Matthew replace shepherds with Kings (or if not kings, wise, rich and educated men). Now, this is surprising. You know, it's like mixing up the chauffeur with the President. At Jesus's time, shepherds were generally young men, sometimes they were still children, they were part of the poorest among the poor, uneducated, living tough lives. Kings, on the other side, were kings: Older generally, hopefully wise, living sophisticated lives. And yet in the Gospel it does not matter whether you are a shepherd or a king, the chauffeur or the President, the announce of the kingdom is extended to all.

And not only the Gospel claims that it does not matter who people are to receive the good news, but it says to us that our identity and our roles can easily shift: In the Bible actually, shepherds are called to be kings (as was David) and kings are called to be shepherds (as the prophets call them to care for their flock). Social status, age or education: All of that does not define people as they truly are.

So what do these people have in common? Yes, they all come to adore the Virgin and her child. But why do we find them there together, "paying homage", worshiping, with no other agenda than letting their heart adore and be adored by Jesus. Well, what all these people have in common, shepherds and kings, is that they all look at the sky. They all look at the sky and that's where the Revelation come from. Seeing the angels come down, seeing a bright star. In the Gospels, shepherds and kings (at least those Magis) have that in common that they have a deeper longing than everyday life and they know how to dream. There are so many mention of dreams in the Christmas stories: This is if you will the common thread. Of course those dreams are not the daydreams of distracted people. Those are the dreams of people who know how to sit silently with their own hearts, pondering their true desires and looking for hope.

And so the Gospel reminds us today that the only condition to hear about the salvation brought by Christ is to be able to dream, and this should be underestimated.

There are real dreams killers in this life, and probably Herod is this symbol of all the dream killers we meet in our society: Political oppression, criminal organizations, social injustices, abusive institutional authorities. All the things that prevent us to grow, to change, to receive something new, to become someone different. Herod is characterized by his own incapacity to dream: He just want to keep things the way they have always been, or believe they have always been. All powers are oppressive when they try to bring us back in a (generally mythic time) when things were supposedly better. But their underlying message always is: *Don't even bother. And don't bother us. It is what it is.* Of course, it's not only about oppressive powers. The way it comes to us most of the times is with negative people who try to contaminate us with their own disillusion with life: *It will never work*, is their favorite motto.

And yet, if we are honest, the main obstacle to our dreams is our own propensity to live small. Maybe not in our lives, but in our heads and in our hearts. We give up easily on dreams. Maybe we still dream when we are 20, but generally by the age of 30 we have stopped dreaming: we deal with real life. Which often means: we get stuck in everyday business. *How could we dream, we barely take the time to sleep.* And it does not matter whether we are a shepherd trying only to survive or a king happy to be just sitting on his throne. We stop looking for any surprise in life, at some point, we wish nothing happens to us that we cannot control.

We often say that the problem with us sinners is that we desire too much, but maybe we don't desire enough, or we don't desire well enough. Our dreams are too small for God. We don't expect to receive much from God. How often do we hear good Christians saying they never ask God for anything! We say we don't want to bother God. Well, the common message of Christmas and Epiphany is that God loves to "bother" us. God likes to interrupt the important things we are supposedly doing. God makes fun of the wisdom of powerful and religious people. God invites Godself into our lives to adore and be adored.

So how does it unfold for us? Well, for the people who dare dreaming, not daydreams that kill the time, but for those who listen to the true desires of their hearts, it puts their lives into movement. We talk about the "journey" of the Magis and we have remembered their story today with the people of our Spanish speaking congregation, because we may have an experience of this journey as foreigners in a new country: it can be true whether you have immigrated here or but also if you have lived for some times overseas.

Yes, there are economical, political or even religious reasons that lead us to travel, sometimes we even have to flee our own country, but if we search our own hearts we know we take those risks because we dare to dream and to hope for a better life. We want something bigger than what we have been given in our hometown. It can be only material of course, but most of the time it's deeper than that, we want our lives to expand. We need to discover who we are and how God is present with us.

Journey is about of course the spiritual journey. From the conscience to be alive, to be our own person, to the awareness of being a child of God and discovering whom we are called to be for all eternity. Dreams don't only help us escape reality, dreams can help us shape reality. And when reality is bad, it's time to start doing something concrete it's true, but it's also time to have people to look at the stars for inspiration so we can start a new journey. Herod refuses the journey and cling to what he has. We as Christians no matter who we are, we are called to be hope bearers. This is the manifestation the feats of the Epiphany is all about.

And yet, in the end, it's not so much what we do than what we allow God to do in our own hearts, in our lives, in our communities and in this world. How do we know that? As we start this new year, we are called to discernment for our lives. We talk about the " wise men", well this is the true wisdom of the wise. Not a ready made understanding of life but the ability of letting God guide us. Christmas stories are about discerning God's will: Mary. Elizabeth, Zechariah, Joseph, shepherds and kings, dreaming, listening, looking up. We move forward, following the stars, in spite of failures and discouragements along the way.

You may know the feminist slogan: Nevertheless she persisted. Well, you know, not only I think it's good for all of us but it also makes me think of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the world: Nevertheless, she persisted. In spite of all obstacles, violence, brokenness, all the dream killers, in spite of Herod and his crimes, in spite of our own stubbornness and our deafness: Nevertheless God persisted. Nevertheless God brought salvation and reasons to hope from generation to generation. May we persist with God. Amen.