HOMILY FOR EPIPHANY 2017
(Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12)

THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI LEADS US HOME

Children are naturally fascinated with the Christmas scene. After every Mass in every church throughout the world, kids and their families gather around the crèche to reflect on the meaning of Christmas. It is beautiful for me to watch this phenomenon here at St. Paul’s and in other parishes where I have served. When the time comes for adding the Wise Men and their animals to the scene, the children are delighted anew.

When I was in Zanesville at St. Nicholas Parish, there was a boy who especially insisted on participating in the Christmas story by being part of the crèche. Every year from the time he was about two until I left when he was in early grade school, this boy (Matthew – named after today’s Gospel writer) would insist on going right up to the baby Jesus and touching him. He petted the sheep and talked to the shepherds. He knelt before Mary and Joseph. When Epiphany came, St. Nicholas had a very large camel that came out with the figures of the Magi. And Matthew would climb up on that camel as if he were riding with the Wise Men!

Epiphany is the feast of mystery. It is a romantic celebration. Several men – we don’t really know how many, but tradition says three – came from the Orient to present symbolic gifts to the newborn “King of the Jews.” These men, perhaps kings themselves, have to take a long journey to find Jesus. And when they find him, their lives are fulfilled and they go back where they came from; but we have the impression that they left a big part of themselves at the manger scene. Like little Matthew, these kings never forget the experience of Bethlehem and they must have returned to it often in their minds and in their hearts. In a sense, they must have repeated that famous ride many times in their spirits as they lived out their lives. Tradition says that these Kings represent all of us because they symbolize that Jesus came for everyone. On Epiphany, this reality that God’s Son came for the whole human race is made clear and manifest – and this is what the word “Epiphany” means (to be made manifest).

And so the journey of the Magi is also our journey. They ride forever in our Scripture and in our Tradition. And we, like the boy Matthew, are called to ride with them. And when we find this Jesus at Bethlehem, we are in a true sense where we are meant to be – we are home even though we may go someplace else to lay our head and to earn our daily bread. Bethlehem is home for us because Bethlehem is where God chose to make his home with us human beings and it is where every man and woman who ever lives is invited to be at home with God. Of course, we know that Bethlehem leads to Jerusalem and to Calvary and that part of our Christian vocation is to follow Jesus there too. But it all began in Bethlehem and the profound depth of God’s love revealed at Bethlehem became crystal clear in the Ride of the Magi.

In his great poem “The House of Christmas,” G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) has this insight: “To an open house in the evening/ Home shall men come/ To an older place than Eden/ And a taller town than Rome/ To the end of the way of the wandering star/ To the things that cannot be and that are/ To the place where God was homeless/ And all men are home.”
As this poem indicates, we and all humanity are ironically at home at the place where God in the Christ Child chose to be homeless. Here all humankind are one and are at peace. And in order to make this journey home, each disciple and indeed each human person (following the light that he or she has been given) must leave what is familiar and comfortable to go in search of the Child. The Ride of the Magi is not easy. But it is beautiful and fulfilling and romantic and also real. And if we never make it, we cannot find the happiness our hearts so deeply want.

Another way of looking at this ride is to reflect more deeply on the hospitality that the Magi gave to the Babe of Bethlehem. As I said in my Christmas Homily, God migrated from heaven to earth when he became human. Ironically, then, the role of the visitors from the East was to welcome this child into the world. This is the traditional meaning of their appearance at the stable on the Epiphany. The greatest gift the Magi gave was the gift of themselves to the newborn king whom the Father gives to all humanity all the time!

Today I am inviting you to join me in giving something of ourselves to the migrants and refugees in central Ohio. This will be an ongoing process in our parish – a process of welcoming into our world the Baby Jesus in the guise of homeless newcomers to our country who are just starting to set up a home here. To participate in the Journey of the Three Wise Ones is to leave our comfort zone and reach out. This pilgrimage reminds us of what is important in our Christian lives – God and family and service to the community. Unless we serve the lowly and the poor, we will never touch the Christ Child. When we serve the refugee, we hold in our hearts Mary’s baby boy. Let us remember that the Holy Family became refugees early in Jesus’ life when they fled into Egypt to escape King Herod’s clutches. And today, by the way, about one out of every 113 people in the world is a migrant.

So, my brothers and sisters, let us ride on! Christmas and Epiphany must always be a part of our spiritual journey. Every so often, little Matthew in Zanesville would insist on going upstairs in the attic of the church where the Christmas set was kept so that he could see the baby Jesus. He would do this even in the heat of the summer! Just so, it is good for us to return spiritually again and again to our very life and our true home to behold what the Magi saw – the stable where God chose to be born for us!

And it is just as good to welcome the stranger to be at home in our central Ohio community – the stranger who is Christ the Lord.