

The Epiphany of the Lord

A number of years ago there was a Christmas questionnaire that was circulated to rate Catholics on their biblical knowledge. One question that was asked is: How many wise men were there? What is your answer? It is a trick question because the bible doesn't say how many there were it just says, as we heard in the gospel reading today, that they presented three gifts to Jesus, the new born king –gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The number of wise men is not given.

The gospel reading today presents us with a contrast between the three wise men, sometimes called the three kings, and Herod who was King of Judea where Jesus was born. The wise men bring their gifts and place them at the feet of Jesus the new king while King Herod, tries to kill him. In fact he orders that all male children under the age of two in his kingdom be killed.

We don't know what happened to the wise men after their encounter with Jesus and according to Fr. Ron Rolheiser, a Catholic spiritual writer that is exactly the point. He argues that "their slipping away into anonymity is a crucial part of their gift. The idea is that they now disappear because they can now disappear. They have placed their gifts at the feet of the young king and can now leave everything safely in his hands. His star has eclipsed theirs."

Herod, however, doesn't see things in this way. Jesus, the new born king, threatens him since he himself is a king. "The glory and light that will now shine upon the new king will no longer shine on him." Hence he tries to kill Jesus. Rolheiser summarizes all this saying that while the three wise men saw new life as promise and they bless it; King Herod saw new life as threat and he cursed it.

What about us, do older brothers and sisters see their younger brothers and sisters as a promise or a curse? Do parents see their children who might be better looking, more intelligent, or more talented than themselves as a promise or a curse? Do workers in their 50s or 60s look at younger people who are talented and full of energy as a promise or a curse?

This is a question for me as a 67 year old pastor who has three young men from the parish in the seminary who will be ordained to the priesthood in the next three to four years. I try to see them as a promise but I am tempted to see them as a curse since they may change things that I have worked a life time setting in place! Can I safely leave things in their hands?

The question for us on this Feast of the Epiphany is: "How do we react when a young star's rising begins to eclipse our own light?"