

"A Light for All Peoples – A Dilemma"

Homily of January 1/2, 2005

by Father Jim McGee

Today we have just heard the story of the magi, the wise astronomers and respected advisors to their king – wise men from a foreign culture and foreign faith tradition – coming to give homage to Jesus. We also hear of Herod's insecurity as he fears the Christ child as a threat to his power.

It is from this story that the Gospel of Matthew begins to tell us that it is Christ Jesus is the manifestation of God's light to all peoples.

In today's world where our mobility and our technology has made us so aware that we are a people of many cultures and many faith traditions, a number of questions may arise within us: -- Is it only in the Catholic Church that one finds the words of eternal life and the way to God? -- Is God present in other religions? If yes, how can Jesus and Christianity be the light to the world if other religions reach God also? -- Are we threatened or insecure about our faith by such a possibility, as Herod was threatened by the arrival of the Christ child?

Well, the answer is a rather mixed one.

On the one hand, we Catholics, like many Christians churches, believe that the fullness of revelation and God's plan for the world and personal salvation is found uniquely and fully in Jesus Christ and the gospel.

On the other hand, except with rigid fundamentalists, there has almost always been an understanding, - that any good person is God's person; - that other religions have a ray of the same divine light that reaches into our lives and dispels our darkness .

They are like us and yet unlike us.

In Rome in 2003, the Catholic bishops from throughout Asia met to seek the best way to present Christ to Asian peoples. In the document published from their discussion, they gave us a remarkable testimony to the belief that we can learn from other religions. They listed the following lessons that Christians could take from other religions:

"From Muslims the Church can learn about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
From Hindus the Church can learn about meditation and contemplation.

From Buddhists the Church can learn about detachment from material goods and respect for life.

From Confucianism the Church can learn about filial piety and respect for elders.

From Taoism the Church can learn about simplicity and humility.

From animists the Church can learn about reverence and respect for nature and gratitude for harvests.

The Church can learn from the rich symbolism and rites existing in their diversity of worship. The Church can, like the Asian religions, learn to be more open, receptive, sensitive, tolerant, and forgiving in the midst of a plurality of religions."

For many young people here, their statement may sound like "just good common sense." But for many of us older folks, this is a remarkable statement – even heretical – according to what we had learned years ago. But the bishops also reminded us that we who are baptized still choose

- to be faithful to our baptism;
- to stay close to the Christ whose words give hope and life;
- to stay close to the Church community that has nurtured our faith.

And we, too, have much to offer. But now we understand a little better the marvelous working of the spirit, blowing where it wills, as Jesus tells Nicodemus in the Gospel of John (John 3:8).

This dilemma of numerous paths to God reminds me of common experience of parents with their children. – the experience of a child, asking their mother which child they love most.

Finally, perhaps, the conversation comes down to "If you love her more than me then you don't really love me." And the wise mom replies, "I love each one of you in a special way that is perfect just for you."

Perhaps this answer is a much better way to speak of the dilemma of various paths to the same God and the wisdom of each path helping the others.

To take this approach need not lead us to a blasé or indifferent attitude towards our religious heritage or to a fear that we or our loved one might be tempted to "jump ship."

My own experience has shown me that people grounded in one faith tradition and who expose themselves to the teaching and rituals of other traditions actually find their commitment to their own tradition deeply enriched.

As one Catholic writer has poetically phrase the relationship between our faith tradition and the others: put our faith tradition's relationship with other faiths:

Not a light instead of other lights,
not the light that puts out all others,
but as the most rare and poignant beam of all.

So which religion is first? We Catholic Christians would do well to think of and treat people of other religions as Jesus did: not to "lord authority over them" but to seek a role as servants of all.

Perhaps our problem is not which tradition is the true path, a search for absolute certainty amidst great diversity. Perhaps the question for our modern world is not "Which religion is the only true one?" – and making all others false.

For, how could the God who we have proclaimed as love this holiday season, how could the God whose light radiates on all creation, love only Catholic Christians and leave all the others out in the cold?

Not a light instead of other lights,
not the light that puts out all others,
but as the most rare and poignant beam of all.

Since the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the war in Iraq, we Americans have become aware of another major religious tradition – Islam – fellow people of the "Book" whose numbers are about 1 billion people, similar to ours. Tragically, it was the few fundamentalist extremists that brought this awareness, but they have very little to do with real Islam. And, frankly, we Catholics must acknowledge that the use of violence to assert the "truth" of our own Catholic tradition has been a painful part of our own history.

So, the pastoral staff here at CTK would like you to attend a special educational program at one of our neighboring churches.

It is a four-part series, titled

Where are Paths Cross: Islam and Christianity
Wednesdays, January 5, 12, 19 & 26; 7:00 to 9:00 pm
Hillcrest Congregational Church
404 Gregory Lane, Pleasant Hill
925-689-8260

While the emphasis of the series will be on the teachings of Islam, the common ground found in both religions will be explored.

Included among the topics are

- the history, spirituality and mysticism of Islam;
- major tenets and daily practices;
- living in our local communities as Muslims and Christians;
- Islam in America and the path we all can follow towards global peace.

The presenters on Islam and Muslim life are Dr. Amer Araim and Dr. Giv Nassiri. Christian thought and practice relating to the Islamic content discussed will be presented by Dr. William “Skip” Holliday and Rev. Laurie Manning of Hillcrest Congregational Church. Child care will be provided free of charge. Free will donation. An audio tape of the sessions will be available.

Do join us!