

EPIPHANY - 2006
“He is so ordinary.”

By now, it's all over. There are still some Christmas lights on houses in our neighborhoods, some, of course, will still be there on the 4th of July. For the world, Christmas was over on December 26th. And here we are; to look around you'd think it was still Christmas Day. We are, as they say, “the odd man out.” In the eyes of our society, we are odd. We should have other things on our minds to prepare for, like Martin Luther King Day and, of course, Valentines Day. But the Church says, “*Not so fast!*” Let's not rush into other things so quickly. Take time to look at the baby in the crib. Who is this child? Why is he here? What will he do?

Father Ron Rolheiser tells the story of an old church in Holland. When people entered, they would always bow toward a whitewashed wall. Everyone had been doing it for so long that nobody questioned it. They didn't know why they bowed toward the wall, but they did. It was tradition, and it felt right. Then, one day, the parish decided to renovate the church, and as they were stripping the whitewash off the wall they discovered the traces of a painting. Very carefully they peeled off the paint and slowly, a very beautiful centuries-old painting of Christ emerged. No one had ever seen it before, yet everyone had been bowing to it, not knowing why, but sensing that there was good reason for reverence.

Our Western culture still bows towards the crib in Bethlehem, but, like the people in that church in Holland, we are not really clear any more as to why we do it. We may be post-Christian in our beliefs, attitudes, ethics and politics, but we still celebrate Christmas. There may not be much conscious faith left in our Christmas celebrations, just an habitual response to a tradition. But before we start condemning someone, this is not all bad.

It's better than not bowing to the wall at all. We sense that there is something special beneath the cultural whitewash of Christmas. The reason we Catholics have an extended Christmas celebration is to give us time to peel off the whitewash and see clearly the Christ whose birth we celebrate; to make sure we know to whom we bow and offer our gifts.

I wonder what expectations the magi had when they followed that star. What did they expect to see? Were they on the way to a royal palace? If so, they'd better bring gifts that would fit into such a place of splendor. Gold would be most fitting for a king, and so would expensive perfumes and soothing balms. But when they got there, they realized that their gifts were actually not very appropriate at all, as they gazed upon a baby in a manger, a feeding trough. He was poor. His parents were like refugees. And then, to their utter surprise, they learned that the king of the area was not happy at the birth of this new king. He wanted to kill him.

This Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, but he really didn't fit into anyone's expectations, not just Herod's. In fact, the real message of our Epiphany celebration is that Jesus came as the savior of the whole world. He came for the people of all nations, even those from distant lands. He came for us. We are the people from distant lands. And, somehow, through the extraordinary grace that surrounded the crib, those magi bowed down in humility before a new kind of king. They may even have felt a oneness with him. He had a power that didn't threaten, that didn't intimidate, that didn't strike fear into the human heart. It was just the opposite. His power had a way of bringing peace, comfort and joy to the human heart. The magi went back by another way. That is, they went back to their homes changed. They were no longer the same. To think that God is found in the ordinary, in the simple, in the poor, in the helpless! That changes everything.

Still drawing on the thoughts of Father Rolheiser: The message for us is clear. If we can see God in a manger, we can see God in our kitchens, at our tables, in our wounds and in each other's faces. Who would have thought that Jesus, the Messiah, would be so ordinary? We still expect him to be a superstar. In fact, superstars still attract us, celebrity still sucks us in. The effort to satisfy our curiosity about Jennifer, Brad, Paris and George is a billion dollar industry. We travel to Europe to find the miraculous Christ and miss the ordinary Christ with us at home. We go to places like Fatima, Lourdes and Madjagoria to see where Mary may have cried, and fail to see the tears shed at our own breakfast table. We are intrigued by a Padre Pio who had the wounds of Christ on his hands, but shy away from the wounds of Christ in those suffering around us from injustice and poverty. We pray for visions and miss a beautiful sunset. We marvel at the gift of tongues and miss the wonder of a crying baby. We look for Christ everywhere except where he chose to dwell; in our flesh, with us.

Could this be why the scriptures never describe what Jesus looked like? Was he short or tall? Did he wear a beard or not? Were his eyes blue or brown? Apparently, in terms of appearance, Jesus wasn't worth describing. He must have looked like everyone else. Even after his resurrection, he was mistaken for a gardener, a cook and a traveler. In America, Jesus in the crib looks Caucasian. In Africa, I imagine he is black. In Korea, is he more Asian looking? It doesn't matter. He looked ordinary. He was one of us. He came for all of us. We are all called to share in the life of his love. We are all made for it.

How do you imagine Jesus when you receive him in Holy Communion? I imagine him as love enfleshed, because only the love of Jesus can transform my heart. Nothing else matters.