

## FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

### *“Becoming Human”*

The world has moved on and we Catholics are still celebrating Christmas. While the stores are itching for us to think “Valentines Day,” we are still focusing on the Wise Men and the safety of the baby Jesus. The world’s problem is that it doesn’t seem to care about the story of Jesus’ birth, while our problem is that we seem to know it too well. We’re so familiar with it that it doesn’t excite us very much any more. When I started reading today’s gospel, I can imagine some of you said to yourselves, “*I know this one,*” and then shifted your mind to neutral. I’ve done it. Sometimes, my listening (not my hearing) is so bad that when I respond, “*Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ*” at the end of the gospel, I couldn’t tell you what it was about. We don’t expect to hear anything we haven’t heard before.

In some ways, it’s too bad we hear the Christmas story for the first time when we are little children. If we’re not careful it can get lumped into the kaleidoscope of Christmas stories that have nothing to do with reality, like Frosty the Snowman or Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Now, that’s a story I think should be banned. Rudolph couldn’t play in any reindeer games because he had a big red nose? Only when he was needed by Santa was Rudolph valued. Is that the message we want our kids to hear?

If we’d never heard the story of Jesus was conceived, how the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to have a son by the power of Holy Spirit, it would make our mouths drop open in awe. We heard that story a couple weeks ago, and I didn’t see any mouths drop open. Last week, the shepherds were amazed by what happened to them. We weren’t amazed. We know the story too well. We knew Jesus would escape to Egypt and that the wise men would outsmart Herod. Who needs to listen? While there are countless stories of men becoming gods, this is the first one of a God becoming a man. That should blow us away, but it doesn’t. We’re too

familiar with the story. There aren't any surprises for us anymore; or so it would seem.

A few weeks ago, I read something that is making me look at this whole Christmas story with new eyes, from a different perspective, in a way that makes it sound fresh and new. Now it seems so obvious that I wonder why I never realized it before. It's like it has been hiding from me in plain sight all these years. What I read was an insight by the Jesuit anthropologist Teilhard de Chardin who said, "*We are not human beings struggling to be spiritual, but spiritual beings struggling to be human.*" When I read the Christmas story with that thought in mind, lights went on in my head.

This Christmas story is about God becoming "incarnate," as the new translation of the Creed says; literally, "taking on human flesh." Or as we would say, it's about God becoming a human being; a spiritual being becoming human. Now, we were created in the image of that God who existed for all eternity, a spiritual being who was enfleshed in Jesus. This means that we are all spiritual beings created and enfleshed at the moment of conception. Our task in life is to become human, just like Jesus did. We say we want to be more spiritual, and that is good. But the irony is this. The evidence that we have become more spiritual is that we have become more human. We become more compassionate, loving, forgiving, faithful, courageous and caring. That is to say, we become more like Jesus. The only way we can live out being spiritual is through our humanity. We become more human.

The only thing holding us back is sin; the original sin we were born with and the sins we have committed. You see, sin distorts our humanity. It warps it into something less than what we were created to be. (Fun House Mirrors) In fact, some sins are so violent and horrible that we hear people say, "*Who ever did that is inhuman.*" Jesus breaks on the scene in human form to show us what the "spiritual made human" is meant to look like. That's why

Jesus says, “*Follow me,*” and “*Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.*” How human we become depends on how we respond to Jesus’ invitations.

Have you ever seen a dog that wasn’t happy being a dog; a bird that wasn’t happy being a bird? A cat that wasn’t happy be...? Well, 2 out of 3 isn’t bad. But I know all kinds of human beings who are not happy being human beings. Some are here today. We’d rather be gods, all-mighty, all powerful and all knowing, like Adam and Eve wanted to be in the garden, and some of us think we are. We don’t like our bodies; we’re getting old, too heavy, too slow in maturing. That’s all part of the human condition, and we have to embrace ourselves nonetheless, because that is who we are.

It seems so much more in reach for me to become more human than to become more spiritual. I mean, if I become more spiritual, saintly, will I start to levitate, get the stigmata or something extraordinary like that? Boy, that’s out of reach for me. But to become more loving, forgiving and understanding isn’t. With God’s help, I can do that. So can you. The Holy Spirit empowers us to become better human beings, to live more in the likeness of Jesus.

Notice, too, that Jesus couldn’t become a human being without Mary’s “Yes!” And that yes grew over the years as she became a believer in Jesus. Well, we can’t grow in our humanity without someone’s “Yes” to us. That is why we need one another, family, friends, and a community of faith. The first words Colton Harris-Moore, known now as the “barefoot bandit,” remembers hearing as a child were spoken by his mother. She said, “*It would have been better if you had been born dead.*” He is now in jail for not living up to his dignity as a human being. It’s understandable to know why he didn’t. When we ask God to transform our hearts it is so we will become more human, with hearts more like Christ’s heart. May this Eucharist we now celebrate continue that transformation.