

## Epiphany – Year A 2008

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- 1) We all know the Patroness of our church, Saint Teresa of Avila
- 2) Many of us have heard of Saint Therese of Lisieux,
- 3) And of course some of us are just waiting for the pope to officially canonize Mother Teresa of Calcutta
- 4) But how many of us here have ever heard of Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross?
  - a) I thought so.
- 5) Well, she was a German Jewish philosopher who,
  - a) converted to the Catholic faith in the 1930s,
  - b) became a Carmelite nun,
  - c) and was eventually murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz in 1942.
- 6) She was canonized by John Paul II in 1995 as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross –
  - a) the name given to her when she entered the Carmelite order –
  - b) Though most people know her by her birth name - Edith Stein.
- 7) When John Paul proclaimed Edith Stein a saint,
  - a) he hoped that it would be a way to bring Judaism and Christianity together;
    - i) after all, she was a Jewish woman,
      - (1) a Catholic nun,
      - (2) a Christian Martyr,
      - (3) killed by the Nazis;
    - ii) it would show our solidarity with the people of Israel.
- 8) Well, just because the pope is infallible, doesn't mean he can't be naïve.
  - a) The Jewish world exploded in anger at her canonization.
  - b) it led to protests, petitions,
    - i) and indirectly to moving the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz,
      - (1) established there to pray for all who died there,
      - (2) away from that memorial site.
  - c) Why?
    - i) She wasn't killed for being Christian, the Jewish community cried,
      - (1) but for being Jewish
    - ii) To canonize her
      - (1) was to hijack the holocaust for Christian purposes.
- 9) And thus sadly Edith Stein was not only a Jew, a Catholic, a convert, a martyr, a victim, but also a pawn in the ongoing battle between Jew and Christian.
- 10) Yes, ongoing. That might surprise some to hear;
  - a) After all, we think we, are Americans; if there is ever a place where Jews and Christians live in peace it is here after all, as we are wont to say, "some of my best friends are Jewish!"
  - b) And yet who here has not inherited the prejudices of our parents?
  - c) Who has not used the insults developed over generations of conflicts?
  - d) Who here has not resented the mess in the Middle East and blamed it at least in part on Israel?
  - e) Who here has not looked at the Jewish people, especially those who dress differently than we do or speak differently than we do as different – outsiders, who have to be fought, especially when they band together to protect their political interests here on the lower East Side?
- 11) No, if we are not aware of that ongoing battle
  - a) it is because the ideas that shape it
  - b) and the fear that feeds it
    - i) are so close to us that we do not even recognize it.

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- 12) And thus we do not recognize it when it is shouting at us from the very pages of sacred Scripture in Matthew's description of the Jewish King, Herod.
  - a) Herod who did not know his own scriptures
    - i) and thus had no idea where the Messiah was to be born;
  - b) Herod who should have greeted the birth of the Messiah with joy,
    - i) but instead reacted with fear
  - c) Herod, who soon would kill the innocent children of Bethlehem
    - i) in an attempt to stop this newly born king.
- 13) For Jews, Matthew's story of Herod is anti Jewish propaganda
- 14) For Christians, Matthew's story of Herod is Sacred Scripture
- 15) For Both, Herod, like Edith Stein, becomes just another pawn in that ancient battle.
- 16) And yet, it was not supposed to be this way,
  - a) For in that part of the Bible which is Sacred Scripture to both Christians and Jews, we encounter the words of today's first reading,
    - i) Words written when the Jewish people were returning home after a generation of forced exile in the far - off kingdom of Babylon.
    - ii) During that time they had been forced to follow Babylonian customs, speak the Babylonian language, and sometimes even worship Babylonian gods.
    - iii) They were forced to become Babylonians
      - (1) and it would be understandable that now they would want to be Jews
        - (a) they would fear foreigners,
        - (b) focus on themselves
        - (c) and reject the outside world.
    - iv) But when we read the prophet's words in today's first reading we see that is NOT what God wanted.
    - v) God did not want them to focus on themselves but to follow the Law as a sure guide to a good life,
    - vi) God did not want them fear foreigners but to invite them to follow God's law as well
    - vii) God did not want them to reject the outside world but to open themselves to it,
      - (1) Welcoming all nations to come and worship their God.
- 17) When they did this, the prophet said, they would become a light to the nations;
  - a) Guiding them, inviting them welcoming them to become with them the people God creates us to be and calls us all, Jew and gentile to be.
- 18) This is why for Matthew, the story of King Herod is not complete
  - a) without the story of the Magi.
- 19) For us they have become kings in their own right;
  - a) Their number has been fixed at three
  - b) they have been given the names Caspar Melchior and Balthasar,
  - c) and if you want to pray before their graves you can do so in of all places, the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany!
- 20) But for Matthew none of this would have mattered.
  - a) What mattered was that they came from the east;
    - i) from the very lands in which God's people were once forced to live
  - b) What mattered was
    - i) that they heard the invitation,
      - (1) spoken of by the prophet
      - (2) symbolized by that star
      - (3) and worshiped God embodied in Jesus.
      - (4) And thus showed themselves truly to be Magi - wise men.

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- 21) For Matthew, Herod and the Magi belong together then
- a) NOT because Herod is Jewish and the Magi are not
  - b) Not because Herod is evil and the Magi are good;
  - c) but rather because Herod and the Magi represent the two ways all people react to the radical invitation of God symbolized by that star and embodied in Jesus.
  - d) We either react as Herod did, seeking to destroy the one who threatened him;
  - e) Or we react as the Magi did, did seeking to follow the one who invited them to become the people God calls us all to be.
- 22) OF course it is not that simple; we would be quick to argue;
- a) For the Jewish people the light of God is the Law
  - b) For Christians it is the law revealed and embodied in Jesus
  - c) To accept Jesus is to follow that law and be part of god's people, just like Edith Stein did.
  - d) To reject him is to reject the law; to reject the light just like Herod did and on and on and on it goes; never once realizing that now it is we who
    - i) fear others,
    - ii) Focus on ourselves
    - iii) and reject the outside world.
- 23) Well this may be what we want,
- 24) it may even from time to time be what our leaders, inside and outside the Church want
- a) But it is NOT what God wants. Because when
    - i) we invite others to share our way of life here
      - (1) rather than fear them when they try
    - ii) when we serve others
      - (1) rather than protect ourselves
    - iii) And when we live in this world
      - (1) rather than reject it,
    - iv) The light of that Epiphany star still shines – in us; for we become a part of that light to the nations;
      - (1) inviting, not coercing,
      - (2) proposing, not imposing,
      - (3) encouraging and never rejecting anyone who wants to walk with us as all of us follow the light
        - (a) promised by the prophet,
        - (b) symbolized by that star and embodied in Jesus.
      - (4) Because when we do that we walk in the company of those wise women, The four Saint Therasas, and of the magi, those wise men; and who knows? maybe we will become wise women, wise men too.