

Lent is a time for us to reflect upon our relationship with God. Lent is a time for us to go deeper. Scripture takes us there. On the surface there appears a story, as if it is recorded by a reporter. Scripture is much more as it is the divine Word of God.

In today's case it is from the Gospel writer Matthew (Mt 2:1-12). When we hear scripture it is good to ask a few questions: Why is this story being told? Who is the story being told to? What does the story tell us about our faith? How shall we respond?

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

*And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

I was fortunate to volunteer at the USCCB retreat at Mundelein in January where over 250 US bishops gathered at the direction of Pope Francis. The Retreat Master, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, was sent by the pope, who opened the retreat with the image of the bishops all in a boat together. The same boat as it were, since they each are leading their flock through the crisis. He described this boat as a row boat, with the bishops sitting side by side, pulling together on the oars to move the boat through the choppy waters. And it was good that they were all going in the same direction. But was it the right direction?

In fact, it was the wrong boat! The correct boat is a sailboat whose sails are filled by the wind of the Holy Spirit. The bishops need to be in the same boat, but the movement and direction are not of their own effort alone. The movement will be determined by the divine, not the human. The humans must participate with the Holy Spirit, be led by her, not the other way around.

That was the first day. Sunday was the middle of the retreat and it was The Epiphany of our Lord. How appropriate! At the last hour the volunteers were invited to attend the Mass with the bishops, so I did. And they heard the Reading I quoted above.

Fr. Cantalamessa offered a homily to the bishops. Mind you, the bishops are not used to listening to homilies as they are usually the ones preaching. I will paraphrase what I heard.

He said the Trinity is always present in scripture and scriptures teach us lessons about God, our faith and our relationship to Him. In today's scripture there are three characters: King Herod, the chief priests and the scribes, and the magi. He spoke about the relationships in this way.

King Herod had a choice of God's will or his own will. He made the decision to keep his power. There was no discerning or attempt to understand God's will. The choice was all about himself and keeping his position. His ego, not God's will.

The chief priests and the scribes knew of the scripture passage from the prophet Micah, a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. They knew that the messiah was to come from Bethlehem, so they pointed the magi in that direction. They knew for themselves but did not go. They stayed at the home office, not making any effort to meet the messiah. Someone else will be responsible for greeting the messiah. They did not think it should be them, so they stayed in Jerusalem.

The magi, foreigners from another land, having heard nothing from the prophet Micah, were called to follow a star. They were starry eyed, looking toward heaven, open to where it would lead them. They did not know, but they went searching. They found the messiah right where the star led them, greeting him with gifts. By following the star, the messiah was revealed to them: a precursor of the Kingdom of God, being for all, Jews and Gentiles alike. And having met Christ, they went another way. Once we encounter Christ, we cannot travel the path we have been on, we too must go another way.

And then the preacher to the pope asked the bishops to reflect on which character was most like them. So, take a few minutes to answer that question silently for yourself. Then I'll have you break into small groups to share your thoughts, before we gather as a large group again for further sharing and the wrap up.

Lent is a time to go deeper. Seek and ask what Jesus reveals to you today, then contemplate your response. What does his revelation motivate you to do? Hopefully at Easter you will be prepared to go another way! And Deacon Paul will provide you a tool, Lecto Divina, which will help you go deeper. In the meantime, there is Communion Service where in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah where we are encouraged to do God's will and in the Gospel of Luke Jesus says, "Follow me." Will you? Let us Pray. Lord, guide us deeper into our spiritual life so that we may find you. Reveal to us what your will is for us so that we can respond to your call to follow you. Amen.