

Confirmation

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Most nativity scenes look very similar. Jesus is the center of the nativity scene, resting in a trough with Mary and Joseph gazing lovingly at Him. There are a few sheep and cattle frozen in time near the crib. Some shepherds are usually stationed near the newborn babe still looking surprised from their encounter with the angels. Lastly, most nativities have three magi approaching from the side opposite the shepherds.

One nativity, however, found outside a convenience store in a small southern town, was a little different. All of the magi were wearing firemen's helmets. When a visitor asked a local who worked at the "Quick Stop" why the magi were wearing helmets, the woman answered in a heavy southern accent, "You never read your Bible? It says that the wise men came from *afar!*"

For the record, the wise men did not come from a fire, but from "afar," probably from Persia. While some nativities have the magi looking like royalty, they were more than likely astrologers. If they had lived today, we might best identify them as university professors—educated men who often travel as part of their research and studies. While they are often set off to the side of our nativity scenes, this does not mean that they are unimportant. In fact, the magi play an important role in the story of Christ's birth because of what they *confirm* for us, none of which has anything to do with fighting fires.

When most Catholics hear the word, "confirmation" we immediately think of the Sacrament of Confirmation. However, there is another important use of this word in spirituality. Confirmation can refer to God *confirming* or *verifying* something that He has been doing in our lives or *confirming* that we are living and acting according to His will and desire. For example, I shared with you several weeks ago how God seemed to be telling me in prayer that He was calling me to move beyond the boundaries of our parish and of my comfort zone. He gave me confirmation of this through the boy who called me a hobo. Often, God gives us confirmation through other people as a way to encourage us and to verify that we are on the right path.

The word, "confirmation" implies that we have already been given an insight or direction regarding something. Generally, God desires to give us the *initial insight or direction* through the intimacy of prayer and will give the *confirmation* through the people and circumstances in our lives. So often, however, Christians want to skip the initial part—listening for God's quiet voice in prayer—and simply ask God to give them the insight and direction through their circumstances and other people. However, it is really important that we do not skip the initial part. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us that Mary did not skip it, but rather, she did a lot of "pondering" about what God was doing in her life. This is a beautiful description of our prayer. Such prayerful pondering is then followed by confirmation about what God is doing.

In our Gospel reading today, God provided some important confirmation through the magi. Their visit to Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus confirmed two important things—Jesus' identity and the scope of His redemption. These surely would have been things that Mary was already pondering in preparation of her Son's birth. Through the wise men, God confirmed for her what she had already been pondering.

The magi brought Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts represent three aspects of Christ's identity. Saint Peter Chrysologus, a bishop in the fifth century, pointed this out in one of his sermons, writing, "Their symbolic gifts bear witness: incense for God, gold for a king, myrrh for one who is to die" (Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. I., pg. 578). These three gifts confirm for us Christ's identity as God, King, and Sacrificial Lamb.

The visit from the magi also confirmed the scope of the redemption Christ was to bring to humanity. The majority of the Jews during Jesus' time believed that the Messiah would come to save only the Jews. Even though the prophet Isaiah had foretold that the Messiah would be a "light to the Gentiles," the prevailing belief was that redemption would just be for the Jews. Frank Sneed, in his book, To Know Christ Jesus, confirms this writing, "The rabbis never referred to these texts of Isaiah—it was as though the prophet had committed a *faux pas* which was politer to ignore."¹ The magi provided confirmation to Mary, and they provide confirmation to us, that Jesus Christ is the God, King, and Sacrificial Lamb whose life was given for *all* people, Jew and Gentile alike.

The magi remind us that God lovingly provides confirmation, through the people and situations of our lives, for the things that He has been gently speaking to our hearts. In honor of the magi, let's be particularly aware this week of how God is confirming His work in our lives.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ What are some things in our lives that we have been asking God to confirm for us? Have we already pondered them in hearts? Are we listening for how God is confirming them through the situations and people in our lives?

¹ Frank Sneed, To Know Christ Jesus, Ignatius Press, 1980, pg. 53