

The Epiphany of the Lord

My family gathers for a white elephant gift exchange on Christmas Eve. The youngest one this year was my 3-year old great-nephew Enrique. Everyone brought a wrapped gift. The teens and adults all drew numbers from 1 to 25, and then in order selected an unopened or previously opened gift. You can steal someone else's gift if you guess you wouldn't open anything better. I ended up with a package of AA batteries with a notice affixed: "Present not included." After the first few gifts were selected, opened or stolen, Enrique's grandmother slipped him a box. As he tore open the wrapping paper, my brother Tom told the group, "Don't even think about stealing this gift from him." Enrique's eyes grew large as he unwrapped a plastic collectible dinosaur egg. He exulted. He threw his arms up in the air, twirled around on his feet, pumped his fists up and down, jumped several times, and threw himself into the embrace of his grandmother. My niece Julie announced, "OK, everybody's gotta up your reaction now when you open a gift." No one can match the exuberance of a child at Christmas.

Today's first reading comes close. Set when the people of Israel ended decades of exile and returned to Jerusalem, it gives reasons for exuberance. The nations who had enslaved them were now streaming toward them with gifts: "the riches of the sea" and "the wealth of nations." "Caravans of camels" were filling Jerusalem, "bearing gold and frankincense." Isaiah commands the people, "Rise up in splendor." "Look about; they all gather and come to you." People separated from their families were now seeing something else: sons coming from afar and "daughters in the arms of their nurses." Isaiah says, "you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow." It sounds like a kid at Christmas.

This reading has been part of the Epiphany Mass for centuries; we hear it every year. In addition to its exuberance, it prophesies the event from the gospel that we know better. The star over Bethlehem recalls the light that floods Isaiah's Jerusalem. Matthew calls the visitors magi, while Isaiah prophesies the coming of kings, which explains how we sing about them and represent them. Matthew says the magi arrived with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and Isaiah describes camels bearing such gifts, so we seat Matthew's magi on Isaiah's camels in our Christmas decorations. Isaiah summoned Jerusalem to rejoice in the light of the Lord, so Christmas invites us to rejoice in the light of Christ, newly born to shine his hope upon us, fulfilling the prophecies of a visionary and patient God.

Jerusalem received its light not for its own glory, but for the Lord's. Israel surely enjoyed those gifts, but the nations were admitting that God is king, the God who rescued the chosen people deserves the homage of other nations too.

When we receive gifts, they affirm the gifts God has already given us, making us lovable in the eyes of others. When we give gifts, we affirm all that God has done for those we love. That much is easy. But because we believe that God loves everyone, this holy season challenges us to love even those we may not like. Isaiah says, enemy nations, repentant, gave gifts to the people they had formerly enslaved. We owe gifts to those we have judged harshly: the outcast and the stranger, the homeless and the depressed. We owe our ears to the lonely and to those with whom we disagree. God's light also shines within them, and our light will give glory back to God when we share the gift of Christmas.