

A few days ago, the Episcopal News Service posted on their website an article that gave rise to

contrasted reactions.

The article was announcing the religious services hosted for the Elected-President and his government.

Nothing new about that – you probably know it better than I do.

On the morning of each inauguration day, the Episcopal church of St John's Lafayette Square offers a private service for the President and his family.

Then, the day after is held an inter-faith service of prayers generally

hosted at the National Cathedral.

It is certainly a bit surprising for people like me who have been used to a strict separation of church and state.

Yet, so far I've had a sense that it is a well accepted tradition.

Most of us, and for good reasons, take comfort in the idea that

God will be part of our public life,

political decisions,

economy,

social justice program and so on.

We believe God is going to work through the government and the institutions -

or at least,

we ask God to do so.

Yet, this time the way some Episcopalians see things seems to have shifted a little bit.

Some comments on the article

went down another road:

Some were saying, yes, we need to pray for and with this government.

But others were saying that,

because they judged the program of the new government conflicting with many Christian values,

- or at least, conflicting with some of the values dearly held by the Episcopal Church,

like the defense of the immigrants, religious and ethnic minorities, LGTB people,

or the protection of the environment -

they were saying: We should refuse to host the service and receive these people at the Cathedral.

A very tough position for us Episcopalians who claim to be

welcoming, open and inclusive.

A very tough claim for us Episcopalians who believe that nobody

is beyond God's reach.

A very tough judgment for us Episcopalians whose worst fear is often to be judged

judgmental and know it all.

In this context of this debate about the inauguration but also far beyond it, I think it is interesting,

- quite thought-provoking -

to have a look at the Gospel that is offered to us on the day of feast of the Epiphany.

Because the question some of us are troubled with today

is part of a much wider question we are still pondering in the church:

Who is granted access to the Lord Jesus?

**Sunday, January 8
Feast of the Epiphany**

**Matthew 2:1-12
The Rev Fanny Belanger**

- but not always -

Herod is denied access to the Lord Jesus, I think this should make us stop for a while.
It should make us stop for a while because
It's not only a human decision, you see, the kings who decide against doing their report,
think different about it, go down another road.

It's the powers of heaven themselves coming to the kings in a dream.
The powers of heaven preventing Herod

to pay homage to Jesus.

If we really stop and ponder it, we may have to acknowledge that
at the creche, it's not because the poor and the foreigners are welcome (The shepherds and the Magis)
that it means automatically that anybody is welcome.

Herod was denied access.

And you know I am thinking – Maybe if Herod got a chance to get there -
he would have found the Virgin Mary so pretty, and Joseph so nice and the baby
irresistible

He would have taken Jesus into his arms,
and he would probably have thought better of it – Baby Jesus would have melted his heart -
and Herod would have become a good and loving king.

Or not.

We'll never know because Herod never got there, and in his wrath
and despair
will have killed all the babies in Bethlehem.

I think there is an important message for all of us today,
a message that is the core substance of Advent, of the proclamation of John the Baptist.
A message we seem prompt to forget, as soon as the feast takes over the penitence.
The message is that if the poor are granted access to God,
It does not mean for us that we are entitled.

It does not mean for us that we are entitled.

Where did we get this idea (if not in our sinful hearts)
that if the little ones can enter, there will necessary be room for anybody?

Actually, the Gospel is very clear about whom is granted access to God: Jesus will say it over
and over
again.

Are granted access the little ones

And the little ones only.

It's not about social classes (The Magis were kings after all)
But it's about the ones who makes themselves like little ones, those who are repentant.

I know we have issues with repentance.

During our last vacations in France, Xavier and I visited Rocamadour,
a place of pilgrimage from the Middle Ages.

The sanctuary is all built in a rock, and the stairs to get there are so high and straight
I could barely made it on foot – it took me ten minutes to recover when I finally reached the chapel.
Well, our guide told us to look how the steps were all curved in, he said if the stone is all eroded it's
because pilgrims would climb the stairs

on their knees.

And so I looked back at the stairs, could not help thinking this was
the craziest thing.

Yes, we have a different way today to understand penitence

There are too many things in life to wear us out and to bring us down that we would beat ourselves up.

Yet, I think the Magis can make us understand what coming to Christ with a repentant heart could look like.

It's about being seekers, travelers.

And you don't, like Herod, or even like the scribes, send somebody else to do the journey for yourself, to make sure it's safe

to spare you the doubts and the trials
of risking something bold and unique.

But we need to start for ourselves looking for another life.

Be willing to learn, and to change and to think differently
and to love anew

and to truly believe in our hearts that it's not because we are welcome the ones we easily despise
that we will automatically be

entitled to God's presence.

Herod's sin was his desire to use Jesus to assert his own power,
and we know that most of our lack of progress in our spiritual lives
is when we try to use God's power and God's grace to our own advantage.

Today, there are so many believers throughout the world who use the name of God to assert their
power, justify their hate and their crimes,

I think Herod's story is a lesson worth to be remembered.

In 2012, at the President Elect's private service of prayers,
The preacher preached John 13, Jesus's last meal with the disciples

the washing of the feet.

And this is what the preacher preached to the new President.

He said: What happens when you realize that you are the most powerful person in the room?

What happens when – like Jesus –

you realize that you are the most powerful person in the room?

Well, you grab a towel and you serve the powerless.

You grab a towel and you commit to serve the powerless.

In a sense, the travel of the Magis all comes down to that.

They acknowledge God in the poor,

and they show themselves to God as the poor.

Some people joke around that the Magis could have brought more useful gifts for a new born
like diapers and lotion.

Gold, frankincense (that is used to worship), myrrh (used to embalm the dead)

What kind of presents that is?

Well, certainly it's rare and expensive,

And so by these gifts, the wise men want to honor Jesus probably, but maybe

- just maybe -

they don't want so much to give gifts than to want to get rid of these things.

They want to make themselves poor.

Poor from the power of money

Poor from the false security of established religion

Poor from our tendency to believe in our own immortality.

Poor from all powers, that how we present ourselves before God.

And that how we should enter our sanctuaries. Amen.