

Feast of The Epiphany
January 8, 2017

Today we commemorate the arrival of the Wise Men at the stable in Bethlehem. It's in some way curious that Christ doesn't go to them or reveal himself to them at some later stage when he is more able. It *was* through an extraordinary act of faith that they find their way to Christ.

You know, it's interesting to think about the fact that it takes as much faith *not* to believe as it does to believe. So it's not at all surprising that a growing number of unbelievers in our world become defensive and even aggressively assertive about what they don't believe.

Remember a few years ago, an atheist group in London during Christmastime rented space on the sides of buses and posted signs that read: "There is no God. Don't worry. Enjoy yourselves."

Well, there's something really disturbing about those signs. It's not what they say so much as what it is they *imply*.

To say there is no God, therefore you shouldn't worry but enjoy yourself suggests that if there *is* a God, you should worry and be sad.

And the atheists *do* have a point, of course. Many Christians worry excessively over their salvation. And far too many tend towards being prudish, self-righteous and unhappy, in spite of the fact that Saint Paul encourages us to rejoice.

French novelist and poet Leon Bloy said that *joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God*. He also said that the only real sorrow is *not* becoming a saint. But most importantly, which is the whole point of today's celebration, there is Jesus, who came to bring us the good news.

Of course, without God as the center of our lives, we *can* do as we please. But our actions have consequences. Greed, lust, pride and all the evil acts we do end in various disasters of bankruptcy, broken marriages, loss of friends, prison or some such thing. God isn't needed to punish us; every evil has its built-in, specific retribution.

So if we insist on remaining in sin, then maybe there is always a reason to worry and be sad.

A second problem with the bus signs is that they give too little attention to the balance between what we do and the fundamental nature of who we are.

The central philosophical truth about who we are states that our actions affect things outside ourselves, while our nature guides and informs, along with our actions, what is inside us. Good and evil actions, then, spring from the heart...who we really are.

And who we really are deep down in our hearts is largely determined by what we believe about the world, about others, and about God.

So if we believe in God, then we believe that we are personally loved by God, that the world is tailor-made for us, that God's own Son showed us how this human life

can be divinely lived. That other people are neighbors, members of the one body of Christ.

We believe that we can be forgiven, that life is good, that we live within the providence of God and that things, as good as they are now, will be even better in heaven.

So, if we really believe all these things, what is there to worry about? Why shouldn't we be the happiest of people? We're still free to choose evil of course, but we won't be so likely to do so because we know that our sins would ultimately make ourselves and those around us unhappy.

Of course we might still find ourselves worrying about the various hurdles life throws at us, but once we accept God as our absolute good, then all those hurdles and problems are rendered ineffective against the joy of being sons and daughters of God.

Perhaps those atheists' signs should have read: "There is no God, so we are orphans in this dangerous world; we have no idea how to be human; our life is governed by fate or chance, so life is meaningless and ends in death. We therefore have every reason to worry and little cause for joy."

Have you ever noticed how some atheists, the ones who aren't always angry, actually seem wistful and nostalgic. I once read about an atheist who told a friend who happened to be a priest: "I don't believe in God anymore — but I miss him.

This is our last Christmas story of the season. Celebrating God's self-revelation to the nations, it caps the meaning of the season. Combined with our readings from Isaiah and Paul, Matthew's narrative positions us to start the new year seeking the signs of God's presence in the everyday circumstances of our world.

It calls us to hope, and reminds us that we are promised that if we seek we will find God, although usually in ways we would least expect. As we begin this year, let us heed Isaiah's call to rise up to be a people of joy and hope because the glory of the Lord is to be truly found among us.