

Epiphany (2025)

Some of you will remember, others will have heard of, a television game show by the name of “To Tell the Truth.”

Its first iteration was from 1956 to 1967 with Bud Collyer as the show’s host.

It has been revived several times, most recently on ABC from 2016 to 2022.

The game works like this. There are three contestants all claiming to be a particular person. One of them is that person.

Members of a four-member cast ask the contestants questions to determine who is telling the truth.

At the end the host says: **“Will the real John Doe please stand up?”**

After some hesitation and false starts one rises, and the mystery is solved.

In today's Gospel, we are presented with a biblical version of the game, only there are two contestants rather than three. Each bears the title "King of the Jews."

The first contender is Herod.

In 40 B.C., Herod the Great was granted the title of 'king of the Jews' by the Roman senate. He remained at this post until his death in 4 A.D.

Just for the record, Herod was not a Jew, rather he was a descendant of the Old Testament character Esau.

According to historians, Herod was a strange mixture.

Politically, he was savvy and an excellent administrator.

At times, he could be very generous. In 25 B.C. during a severe famine, he melted down his own golden plate so he could raise money to feed his starving subjects.

More than that, his building projects were legendary. It was under his regime that the temple in Jerusalem was embellished and made the architectural showcase of the world.

Yet, he was power hungry, subject to extreme paranoia and could be very cruel. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, his paranoia led him to have three of his sons killed.

Augustus, the Roman Emperor, is supposed to have said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

In any event, Herod was the first contender for the title “king of the Jews” that the Wise Men met when they arrived in Jerusalem.

He was a lordly king. Based on his love for building, we can assume his palace was impressive, an edifice that dazzled the eye.

It would have been easy to become awed by the trappings of royalty found in his court. Lesser men might have been diverted from their appointed mission, curried royal favor and stayed in Jerusalem.

Even if they had made the six-miles journey on to Bethlehem, they might have been taken in by Herod’s words about wanting to pay homage to this other king.

They might have complied with his request that he be informed when they found this king.

But, as we learn from the text, the Wise Men were real men, men of integrity. They were too smart to be taken in by this lordly monarch. Instead of listening to Herod, they listened to God.

That, of course, is what we all must do. Day by day we are confronted by voices telling us to turn this way and that. We must be careful to which voice we listen. **“In all thy ways acknowledge him [God], and he shall direct thy paths,”** the writer of Proverbs admonishes us (3:6).

When the Wise Men got to Bethlehem, they found a very different dwelling than Herod’s royal palace. There is no reason to believe that it was anything more than a modest house. Without the guidance of the star, they could well have missed it.

There in this house they found the second contestant, a king as lowly as Herod was lordly.

In art and song, the Magi arrive just after the shepherds leave. The shepherds go out; the Wise Men come in.

But that in fact that was not the case. According to the biblical narrative, they arrived later and found Jesus, again in a house, not a stable.

My initial point is that the Magi did not let the glitz of Herod's court so bedazzle them that they failed to make the trip to Bethlehem and there find the real king of the Jews.

In the biblical version of To Tell the Truth, they cast their ballots in His favor when they offer Him their gifts rich and rare.

Commentators will go on to ascribe these gifts with mystic meaning: gold for a king; frankincense for a priest; and myrrh, a spice used for embalming, for one destined to die for His people.

Regardless of whether they were conscious of any of this, they brought Him their best.

Surely there is a lesson here for us. Two kingdoms and their respective kings still vie for our allegiance today . . . still call for a verdict.

The first is the kingdom of this world with all its false values and worldly pomp. Its king is the God of mammon.

In this kingdom, outward show takes first stage.

To grasp and accumulate is what it is all about. He who dies with the most toys wins!

But what the citizens of this kingdom soon find out is that these toys don't bring lasting happiness and contentment. They are mirages in the desert.

Have you ever seen -- I am sure you have -- children blowing soap bubbles in the sun. These bubbles dazzle the eye and bring excitement. But when tiny hands reach out and try to take hold of them, what happens?

They go away. That is what happens when we get overly enamored by the pomp of this present age, the world of Herod the lordly king, a world of power, prestige, preferment and outward show.

This is not to say that all worldly pomp is wrong. No doubt we all would find it thrilling to be at an event at the White House where the President steps out and the Marine Band strikes up "Hail to the Chief."

Ceremonies of this sort have their place, but neither they nor any of the trinkets of the present age must keep us from following the lead of the Wise Men. They gave their ultimate allegiance to the rightful king of the Jews.

I keep calling Him the king of the Jew, and so Jesus was. But He was more. If we know Old Testament prophecy, we know that He was destined to be monarch of all. The gentiles – people of all nations – were to come to His light and give Him their allegiance.

The Wise Men, themselves gentiles, were advance signs of this coming phenomena. Many more Gentiles were to follow. This is the *mystery* of which Paul speaks in today's Epistle.

'Mystery', as Paul uses the word, was not something beyond man's understanding. Rather it was something which in times past had been hidden but now revealed. For Paul, it was that the gentiles should be fellow sharers in the blessings promised to Abraham. The Magi set the stage for the Gospel going out into all the world, to all people.

But back to my original point, the Wise Men, regardless of their race, brought their best.

Their gifts signaled where their heart was. We are told they worshipped the infant King. That is what we all are called to do. An old Gospel song puts us on the right track when it says:

*All to Jesus I surrender
All to Him I freely give
I will ever love and trust Him
In His presence daily live.*

Is there any area of your life that you are holding onto . . . not handing over to Him? If there is, give it up.

When you do, when you make Him Lord of all, be prepared to see what He can do with a wholly committed life. You will be amazed.

You may well find yourself doing things you thought yourself incapable of doing.

Epiphany, the season we begin today, is a season of light.

Jesus is the true light. Because He has come, we don't have to wonder where we came from, what our purpose is here on earth and where we are going once this life is over.

But there is more. Once we have received His light, we are not to keep it to ourselves. Rather, we are to let it shine through us to others . . . to be beacons in a world filled with drug addiction, violence, hatred and hopelessness.

Are we doing this as individuals and as the parish church?

Bishop William Millsaps tells the story of being in a gift shop on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. A mother was helping her small child pick out a souvenir. He overheard her trying to get him interested in a tiny replica of a historical monument.

The child was not interested. Pointing in another direction, he cried out: **“Mommy, mommy, I don’t want a monument. I want a lighthouse.”**

Well, that is what we, both individually and collectively, are called be. A monument speaks of something done and past; a lighthouse of something present and active. Christians are called to be lighthouses. Are you a lighthouse? Is this church a lighthouse?

Allow me to close with this thought:

When Bud Collyer or whoever says: Will the real Christian please stand up. Be the one who rises to his feet. Be the real deal. Be a lighthouse.