

If you remember back to the beginning of Advent, I tried to get us thinking of Advent as an adventure or as a potentially perilous journey to go out and meet Jesus as he made his way towards us. We had to get rid of the obstacles between him and ourselves; this made the journey dangerous because we had to acknowledge the darkness of sin within ourselves. In that first Advent homily I alluded to the wizard Gandalf's warning to Bilbo Baggins that if he went with the dwarves to help them reclaim their homeland in the Lonely Mountain, Bilbo would not come back the same, if he came back at all. I think I mentioned that that warning might come back up again on the solemnity of the Epiphany which we are celebrating today.

On the solemnity of the Epiphany a very common spiritual interpretation of the end of the gospel is to say that the three magi went home changed after their encounter with the infant Jesus and his family. Scripture can be read in different ways at the same time. The magi literally went home a different way than they came to Bethlehem so that they could avoid Herod. Spiritually, we might say they did not return home the same as they were before they left, if they made it home at all. The Bible doesn't say anything about what happened after they left Bethlehem. There are different traditions about them but, in this case, what actually happened to them is less important than their spiritual fate. Spiritually speaking, having had an encounter with Jesus, can we and should we go home again?

An encounter with Jesus changes us. The more intense the encounter, the deeper the change. What happens when we go back home changed? What happened to Bilbo after the Lonely Mountain? His friends and neighbors didn't recognize him at first and then they treated him with suspicion and thought he was crazy. Have any of you ever had that experience? You welcomed Jesus into your life and now your friends think you are crazy or they avoid you or ridicule you. That happens to a lot of people. What are our options?

There are three. One is to give up and go back to our old ways and routines—we just go back to being who we were before we left. A second option is to remain faithful to Jesus and just learn to live with the situation—that is what Bilbo did and he sort of embraced it. A third option is to remain faithful and, through our good example—not through nagging, complaining, and scolding—to try to plant the seeds of the gospel in our community and help the kingdom of God to grow. Tolkien gives us an example of that at the end of the Lord of the Rings when four hobbits returned home after the War of the Ring to find The Shire corrupted and under attack from evil forces. They were no longer the

hobbits they were when they left home and they drew on their experiences in the war to drive out the evil and reclaim their homeland.

The third option is what is supposed to happen, but there is a little more to the story and again, Tolkien shows it to us. After returning home from their adventures and driving the evil out of their homeland, three of the hobbits—Bilbo, Frodo, and Samwise—were so changed by their experiences that although they lived good lives at home for a long time, that world was not enough. They began to realize there was something else calling to them and eventually they answered that call and went across the sea to the undying lands in the far west.

That is what is supposed to happen to us. Our encounter with Jesus will change us but we cannot and should not divorce ourselves from this world. We have an obligation to fight for what is good in it. We do this by remaining faithful to Jesus in face of trials and persecutions and by trying to lift up our families and societies through our good examples as faithful Catholic Christians. But all the time we need to keep our hearts open, always listening for that voice reminding us that there is something greater beyond this world. It is the eternal undying land of heaven to which Jesus is calling us home.

So how are you going to respond to your encounter with Jesus?