

Epiphany 2024

I was in New Orleans the last couple of days for a meeting of Jesuit trustees in our universities. At Mass the preacher made a point that really startled me and that I think is appropriate to today's feast of the Epiphany. He cited a recent book that claimed that in the Gospels Jesus asks over 300 questions. Only 180 questions are asked of him. Even then, he often answers a question with a question back. He only directly answers three. And even these three are followed by a story that keeps you wondering. What is the greatest commandment? How often do I have to forgive? What must I do to attain eternal life? Each are given a short answer, but then are followed by a story that illustrates but also complicates his answer. The Good Samaritan, the unforgiving debtor. Or with a riddle, save your life by dying to yourself, receive by letting go. The upshot is that people in the Gospel always leave Jesus with more questions than they started with.

As I listened to the homily I was struck by the contrast to chat-gpt. Chat-gpt has an answer for everything! And it will give it to you in seconds. I have never seen it answer a question with another question. Or answer a question with a story or a riddle.

It's the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Today we tell the story of the three wise men. They know a lot. But that is not why we call them wise. They are wise because they wonder. Wonder at something anyone could have seen in the night sky, the rising of a new star on the horizon. Others looking in the night sky may have noticed it, but most probably didn't. And for those that did, it was likely just an isolated factoid. "Look at that. Huh! Was that there yesterday? That's weird" But even then they would not have given it a second thought.

They did though. Because they thought it meant something, that it heralded the birth of some one important. And they wanted to learn who it was. Now they were not conducting some fact finding exercise. Nor were they detached scientific observers. They did not come with notebooks to record their findings. They came with gifts and words of welcome.

We live in a world of answers, available in real time, the moment we need it. We are awash in data and metrics. We know more facts about ourselves than ever before. We have at our fingertips, literally, thanks to smartphones and smart watches, we have at our fingertips in real time, the exact time to the second, or the number of steps we took so far today, or our pulse rate, the latest apple watches can even read our blood oxygen levels or do an EEG now. We know so many more facts about ourselves but are we wiser for it? Do we know ourselves any better? Do we understand one another any better?

What is artificial about artificial intelligence is not that it's a computer. It's that it only gives answers, it does not raise questions. And the answers it gives are crisp and clear, on the spot. It cannot sit with a question, chew on it, mull over it, digest it. It spits out the answer and moves on to the next question. Wisdom is more like a lumbering cow than an AI..

We tend to think that the role of religion is to answer questions, questions about life ...and death, about what's right, and wrong, good and evil. But maybe we should not be looking to God so much for answers but for questions. Not what is God's answer but what is God's question... for me, here and now. What is God asking me and asking of me? And how should I respond? With an answer? Or with another question? To better understand both of us.