

Chalking the Door on Epiphany

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem to visit Jesus, they found him and his mother in a house, not the stable where they had found their first temporary shelter. This is a cue that our Epiphany celebration should focus on our own houses, and it is a very old custom to bless houses on Epiphany. In the East, in particular, it is the custom for the parish priest to go through the parish, blessing houses -- not the elaborate blessing of a new home, but a special blessing that is also often given at Easter, a renewal of the homes in which the people of God dwell and live out the mystery of faith day by day.

In recent years, this custom has been revived in some places in the West, and The Book of Occasional Services of the Episcopal Church provides forms for this blessing. However, there is another way of blessing homes at Epiphany that begins in church but does not require the priest to go from house to house. This custom involves chalk that is blessed by the priest and taken home by families to mark the doors of their homes and takes its root in the Old Testament stories where God tells the Israelites to mark the doors of their home.

On this, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we are blessing chalk at each service to be used to hallow all of our homes throughout our parish and our city. The chalk will be available at the back of the Church. The initials of the 9th century, legendary names of the magi, Caspar, Melchior & Balthazar, are written with blessed chalk on the lintel above the front door of the house, framed by the numbers of the new year, in this way:

20 + C + M + B + 22

The initials also stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, May Christ bless this house.

After making the inscription, the following prayer is offered in the home:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And with thy spirit.

Leader: Let us pray. O Lord, holy Father, Almighty, everlasting God, we beseech you to hear us and vouchsafe to send your holy Angel from heaven to guard and cherish, protect and visit, and evermore defend all that dwell in this home. I call upon your Saints Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, to protect my family, friends, and all who enter here from every harm and danger, and I place this mark over my door to remain as a reminder to us that my home is truly the house of the Lord. O God, make the door of my house the gateway to your eternal Kingdom. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.