

## Epiphany of our Lord January 08, 2017

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3a.5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Christ our light has come into the world and shines in the darkness. On this feast of Epiphany he manifests himself to us in a unique way. The feast of the Epiphany is the mystery of the Lord's manifestation to all peoples, represented by the Magi, who came from the East to adore the King of the Jews. The word 'epiphany' comes from Greek, meaning, a 'showing' or 'manifestation'. Matthew who recounts the event, stresses how the Magi arrived in Jerusalem following a star, seen at its rising and interpreted as a sign of the birth of the king proclaimed by the prophets, that is, of the Messiah. Originally this feast celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, contained four great manifestations of Jesus, namely, the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the coming of the Magi or the three kings, the Baptism of our Lord and the wedding at Cana. Today we celebrate the feast of the coming of the Magi in search of the newly born king and God revealing himself to the universe to a group essentially non-Jewish. The magi were strangers, foreigners, total outsiders who came to pay royal homage to this tiny child. In the first reading of today a prophet encourages the people to stand up and welcome a new day. They have become a light to the nations. They will see all the good things God has in store for them. In the second reading Paul refers to the great mystery of God revealed to him, namely that God desires to save both Jews and gentiles in Christ. Gentiles are joined to Jews in experiencing God's promise of salvation. The Gospel of today tells us about the wise men from the East who followed a star in search of the new born king of the Jews. When they find him, they worship him and pay him homage as they offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Isaiah speaks of a prophecy that was made approximately seven hundred years prior to the birth of Christ expresses the joy of the Israelites as they returned after years of captivity and entered the holy city Jerusalem. The prophecy of Isaiah gave them hope that the promised Messiah would soon rise among the people and that His glory would be seen by all. As God's chosen people, it was prophesied to the Jewish nation that they would be the light of the world and that the nations of the world would come to their light. The prophesy told them of the wealth that would be brought to the Israelites and the multitude of camels that would bring riches to them, we must know that this expression of the prophet was only symbolic in language. The city will see her citizens returning home from all places where they sought refuge from war and destruction. At last Jerusalem has achieved its ideal as a city of light. The light of faith will scatter the darkness of sin and ignorance. Young children will be among them the promise of future generations. The nations will stream towards the New Jerusalem to learn about the Lord. The ships from the sea and caravans from the desert will bring great riches that include gold and incense and items suited for worship and to decorate the Temple. Such wealth is given not to enrich people but to honour the Lord. The true wealth that the Jewish nation gained was that from their people, the divine presence, namely, the Son of God to be born on earth. Today's prophecy of Isaiah concluded with the words, "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

The Second Reading taken from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians, of the commission of God's grace that was given for them, and how the mystery was made known to him by revelation. Paul tells them that God's revelation is universal and sees himself as the steward of God's grace. The mystery he received by revelation he is to hand on to others. Paul considered this as a great grace. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humanity as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Through him all are now the recipients of the grace. Paul indicates two parts of the mystery. The mystery is first of all God's plan of salvation in Christ. Secondly it includes both Jews and gentiles. All are called to be members of the body of Christ and all enjoy the promises God made to Israel. Paul tells the Ephesians that we should always be grateful to the Jewish people of those days. Thanks to them, we sinful creatures rejoice because the gracious mercy of the Lord God was bestowed upon us. Now, through our faith in Jesus Christ and the Sacrament of Baptism by water and Spirit, we are admitted into the Body of Christ as spiritual members of the growing Kingdom of God on earth.

The Gospel Reading of today relates to us the event of the three wise men that followed the star that led them to the Child Jesus. They followed the brilliant star in the sky. To them, the light of the star was a symbol of hope, of joy and of peace. To them, the star was but a small reflection of the fullness of the Light of the world that awaited them at the end of their journey. Who were these "wise men" and where did they come from? In the Greek text they are called magoi which is usually rendered in English as "Magi". Magi were a group of scholars who were associated with the interpretation of dreams, Zoroastrianism, astrology and magic and hence the name 'Magi'. In later Christian tradition they were called kings, perhaps under the influence of Psalm 72:10 which says, "May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!". Again, Prophet Isaiah says "Kings shall see and arise; princes and they shall prostrate themselves". In the western Christian churches, these include the traditions that there were three Magi who visited Jesus, that their names were Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, and that they were kings. These derive from an early 6th century Greek manuscript in Alexandria. Since the earliest days of the church, these wise men have been considered to be representatives of all the peoples of the earth.

The story of the magi or so-called wise men from the East has been a favourite part of Matthew's infancy narratives. The presentation of Matthew details of the birth of Jesus by prefiguring what will happen to him in the future. Jesus the Messiah, the Messianic King, will be rejected by Israel and accepted by the gentiles. Herod, the Chief Priests and the Scribes and all of Jerusalem represent those Jews who reject the messianic king. The magi on the other hand represent the gentiles who recognise and accept him. Technically speaking, these wise men are gentiles and they have no reason to believe or even care about the birth of a Jewish Messiah. Yet the story tells us of their search for the new born king. Matthew is not attempting to show us what really happened historically and factually at the birth of Jesus. He is far more concerned with unfolding for us what that monumental event meant for believers and unbelievers alike. Thus the

meaning is very clear from the general context of Matthew's Gospel. God, in the person of Jesus, is reaching out to the whole world. On the other hand, Herod, the chief priests and others are depicted as being uninformed and confused by the wise men's desire to see the new born king of the Jews. Herod was already the king of the Jews and neither he nor his people were looking for another king. Similar to the ancient story of the intrigue following the birth of Moses, Herod wants to find this child and eliminate him, even though he disguises his plan as a desire to pay homage to the Messiah.

Matthew tells us that the Magi or the wise men found Jesus by following a star, which thus traditionally known as the Star of Bethlehem and accepted the interpretation of the star and followed it to discover the King they were seeking. On finding him, without hesitation or doubt they pay their homage and present him three symbolic gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Three gifts are explicitly identified in Matthew, which are found only in Yemen. Many different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been brought forward. While gold is fairly obviously explained, frankincense, and particularly myrrh, is much more obscure. All three gifts are ordinary offerings given to a king. Myrrh being commonly used as anointing oil particularly at death, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable precious item. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense or incense as a symbol of priesthood, and myrrh, the embalming oil as a symbol of death. This story points to the future of Jesus. He will be rejected by the very people he came to save. Ironically, he will be accepted by the outsiders, the gentiles, the marginalised and the insignificant. Included in this is the symbolic reference to death. In this story Matthew tells of the ability to read the signs of times. Herod and others failed to do it, while the magi read it even though they had no reason to do so. There is talk of following a star. The star is also a symbolic expression, a light representing Jesus as the Light of the whole world.

All in all, today's feast is telling us that for God there are no foreigners, no outsiders. From his point of view, all are equally his beloved children. We all, whatever external physical or cultural differences there may be between us, belong to one single family which has one Father. It means that every one of us is a brother and sister to everyone else. There is no room for discrimination of any kind based on nationality, race, religion, class or occupation. The story tells us that God, in the person of Jesus, is reaching out to the whole world. These pagan foreigners went to great lengths to find the King of the Jews and do him homage. The facts of today's story may be vague but the message is loud and clear. We thank God today that there is no "Chosen People" whether they are Jews or Christians. Let us try to understand more deeply God's closeness to us which is also a reason for us to be close to each other. There are no outsiders. All are called to be members of one family. Yet, we can become outsiders. We do that every time we make someone else an outsider, whether we do that individually, as a family, a community, or an ethnic grouping. To make even a single other person an outsider, that is, to deny them the love and respect which belongs equally to all, is to make an outsider of oneself.

The story the Magi is story of the ways in which God reveals himself and even more about the different responses which his revelation receives. There are numerous

manifestations or epiphanies of God in our lives and in the lives of everyone. In fact the Old and the New Testaments are the expression of such a revelation. We can learn much from the manifestation of God to the three wise men. They were the pilgrims in search of the divine and their joy was immense when they made the discovery. Their faith was childlike and deeply religious. They had a specific purpose in mind and they went in a particular direction. They followed the star and they encountered God. It tells us that we too have to search for our God and cannot rest till we find him.

Finally, the Feast of Epiphany is a reflection of the Light. Through the Birth of Jesus, we see the arrival of the Light in the world. The three wise men followed the brilliant star in the sky. To them, the light of the star was a symbol of hope, of joy and of peace. To them, the star was but a small reflection of the fullness of the Light of the world that awaited them at the end of their journey. Through the Magi, we see the light of hope, of joy and of peace to come. Through the Baptism of Jesus, we see the beginning of the ministry of the Light in the world. Through the miracle at Cana, we see the Light of God manifesting His Supreme power over the element of water. All these events are reminders to us that we too are called to be a light in the world. Being enlighten by the Light of God in our hearts, we are called to go forward and to share with others the Good News, our hope, our joy and our peace that the Light of Christ has bestowed upon us. As we celebrate his feast let us reflect upon Christ the light of the world. As he did to the Magi God shows the stars to us and we might ask ourselves, what are the stars in our lives. The wise men saw the star and followed it. The wise men did not know where the star would lead them. They just followed it until it brought them to Bethlehem and to Jesus. The same star will also lead us to Jesus our King and Lord.

Horror gripped the heart of a World War-I soldier, as he saw his lifelong friend fall in battle. The soldier asked his Lieutenant if he could go out to bring his fallen comrade back. "You can go," said the Lieutenant, "but don't think it will be worth it. Your friend is probably dead and you may throw your life away." "The Lieutenant's words didn't matter, and the soldier went anyway. Miraculously, he managed to reach his friend, hoisted him onto his shoulder and brought him back to their company's trench. The officer checked the wounded soldier, and then looked kindly at his friend. "I told you it wouldn't be worth it," he said. "Your friend is dead and you are mortally wounded." "It was worth it, Sir," said the soldier. "What do you mean by worth it?" responded the Lieutenant. "Your friend is dead." "Yes Sir," the soldier answered, "but it was worth it because when I got to him, he was still alive and I had the satisfaction of hearing him say...."Jim...I knew you'd come."

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