

Epiphany of our Lord- January 03, 2016

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

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany of our Lord. From the early days of the Church, this feast has been considered as an important feast receiving at times more attention than the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord. Celebrated on the 6th of January and in some areas on the first Sunday in the month of January, this feast recalls the arrival of the magi or the three kings to Bethlehem in search of the King of the Jews. Originally this feast contained the commemoration of the Nativity of Jesus, the visit of the Magi, all of Jesus' childhood events, up to and including his Baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist; and the miracle at the Wedding of Cana in Galilee. It is also called Theophany, meaning the Manifestation, especially by Eastern Church. At present on the feast of Epiphany only the coming of the Magi is celebrated. The word 'epiphany' comes from Greek word epiphania, meaning a 'showing' or 'manifestation'. Epiphany celebrates God's revealing or manifesting of Jesus' identity as true God, Messiah, and Saviour of the world.

Matthew who recounts the event, tells us how the Magi arrived in Jerusalem following a star, seen at its rising and interpreted it as a sign of the birth of a new king. These Magi came in search of the newly born king and we visualise God revealing himself to the universe through a group of non-Jewish people. The magi were strangers, foreigners, total outsiders who came to pay royal homage to this little child. In the first reading of today a prophet encourages the people to stand up and welcome a new day. All the darkness will be replaced with light and Israel will 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 join the 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 by offering him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In the First Reading Prophet Isaiah consoles the people in exile as he speaks of the restoration of New Jerusalem. In the New Jerusalem, the glory of God would be seen, not only upon the Jewish nation, but also upon the Gentiles. The prophet invites Jerusalem to rise to its feet and witness all the wonderful things God has in store for it. The darkness and thick clouds of human pride and ignorance are replaced with light. The prophet speaks of the splendour and radiance that envelopes Jerusalem. The glory of God shines over it. Just as

the lips of Prophet Isaiah were once purified by the Holy Fire, so too sins of the nation were purified by the fire of divine judgment. With so much impurity removed, the nation now reflects the light of faith. It becomes the light to the nations, guiding them along the right path to God. The prophet says that as Jerusalem looks on, she sees her children returning home along the way the Lord prepared for them, from their exile to the Promised Land. Those that return are given the assurance that future generations will enjoy all the benefits God has in store for the nation. In thanksgiving for the priceless lessons of faith offered by Jerusalem, the nations will bring wealth by land and sea. This truth is made obvious in the last verse of the passage that they shall bring gold for the Temple and frankincense for the sacrifice and all shall proclaim the praises of the Lord.

In the Second Reading Paul tells the Ephesians of the commission of God's grace that was given to them and prior to the glorious Resurrection of Jesus, the salvation of the Gentiles had remained a mystery. Now, by the grace of the Heavenly Father and the power of the Holy Spirit, the mystery had been revealed to the holy apostles and prophets. Paul, who realized that he has received a special grace from God, was commissioned to make this mystery known to the world. He tells them that God's revelation is universal and sees himself as the steward of God's grace. Through this revelation the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same Body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. The mystery he received by revelation he is to hand on to others. This mystery was hidden from earlier generations and was not made known to humanity. Paul indicates two parts of the mystery. First of all the mystery is God's plan of salvation in Christ. Secondly it includes both Jews and gentiles in divine plan. All are called to be members of the body of Christ and all enjoy the promises God made to Israel. He tells the Ephesians that they should always be grateful to the Jewish people of those days. Thanks to them, we the sinful creatures rejoice because the gracious mercy of the Lord God was bestowed upon us.

The Gospel Reading of today gives us the story of the three wise men that followed the star that led them to the Child Jesus. To the Magi, 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. Matthew in the Gospel narrates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea and the arrival of the Magi during the reign of King Herod. The Magi are the central personages in today's feast of Epiphany. They were pagans who did not know anything about the true God of the Jews. Yet that God revealed to them of the birth of the king he had promised to the Jews.

Because Matthew mentioned that the magi observed the star rising in the East and followed the star, support the tradition that the Magi had the knowledge of astrology. Another factor to consider is that they came from the East. This implies that they came from Mesopotamia, the home of astrology in the Hellenistic world. They came to Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, a totally new place, expecting of course the whole city and the country rejoicing at the birth of the prince. Instead they find suspicion and hatred in the reigning king, the hatred which would in a few days turn to murder. When King Herod heard that a King was to be born among the Jewish people, he panicked and called together all the chief priests and scribes. He panicked because he was afraid to lose his throne.

The Magi found the religious leaders full of knowledge of the past history but totally indifferent as regards the present and the future. The leaders were aware that the Messiah, the King would be born in Bethlehem. They also were aware that the Magi were very sure of the truth revealed to them. Otherwise they would not have travelled a long distance in search of the newly born king. In spite of that the thought of going to Bethlehem with the Magi never entered their minds. These were the same leaders who later rejected Jesus as the Messiah and saw to his crucifixion. What they looked for from their Messiah was political leadership, earthly freedom and prosperity. Now King Herod, after consulting the chief priests and scribes, learnt that it has been prophesied that the King would be born in Bethlehem, the land of Judea, the birth place of King David. He told the wise men to continue their journey and when they had found the Child Jesus, to report back to him so that he too could go and pay homage to the King. Again the star led the Wise Men, not only to the town, but also to the house where Jesus dwelled. When the guiding star stopped over the house, the Magi were overwhelmed with joy. They entered the house and found the Child Jesus with Mary His mother and Joseph and worshipped the King. They offered him gifts worthy of a king, namely, gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew tells us that wise men from the East followed the direction of the star and came to visit the Babe of Bethlehem. In the Greek text they are called magoi which is usually rendered in English as "Magi". Magi were a group or caste of scholars who were associated with the interpretation of dreams, Zoroastrianism, astrology and magic. We are not told what their names were or how many of them there were or their place of origin. Tradition settled on three, presumably because there were three kinds of gifts. They were also given names, probably from the seventh century, Gaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. The name Caspar means treasurer, Melchior meaning splendour,

Balthazar meaning God protect the king. 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. While he is rejected by the very people he came to save, he will be accepted by the outsiders, the gentiles, the marginalised and the insignificant. The star is rather to be seen as a symbol: a light representing Jesus as the Light of the world.

The story of the wise men has been a favourite part of Matthew's infancy narratives. The presentation of the details of the birth of Jesus in a way indicates the future events that will take place in his life. Jesus the Messiah 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 his divine presence and accept him. Strictly speaking, these wise men were gentiles and they had no reason to travel the distance in search of a Jewish Messiah. Yet the divine revelation makes them undertake the difficult journey in 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 of the messianic message to believers and unbelievers alike. Thus the meaning is very clear that 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 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 his homage.

The Epiphany is the celebration of the universal destination of our Christian message. This narrative highlights two important truths. First of all, it reveals the royal Messiahship of Jesus and secondly, of God's revelation to the Gentiles. Considering ourselves as their followers we too are called to adore

Jesus just as the Magi had done. This also tells us that every Christian is the Church, and each one of us has the mission to proclaim the Word. The Magi heard the word through the star that appeared to them and came in search of the King. The feast tells us that God continues to reveal himself through different stars and invites us to discover the presence of the Jesus the King living among us. We have to put forth our efforts to find him. Most of us are born into a Christian family; it is difficult for us to appreciate how great a grace faith is, and easy to take it so much for granted that we fail to exercise it. Our encounter with the Child will fortify us to readily accept the inconveniences and sufferings with joy, to protect what we have found, in order to proclaim the message of the child. From the Magi, who were making the journey for the first time, we learn how faith perseveres, even when the star is hidden. They did not lose hope. When the star appeared again, they continued their search and like them we too will come into contact with Jesus.

The Feast of Epiphany is a reflection that Jesus is the Light of the world. Through his birth we see the arrival of the Light into the world. The three wise men saw the brilliant star in the sky, understood the meaning and followed it. Through the Magi, we see the light of hope, of joy and of peace to come. All in all, today's feast is telling us that for God there are no outsiders. From his point of view, all are his beloved children. 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. There cannot be a single exception to this position. The facts of today's story may be vague but the message is loud and clear. The story tells us that there is no partiality in God and we all of us are his chosen people. 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. 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. The Magi 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.

God's revelation of Jesus of Nazareth to us is a gift. He condescended to us and revealed Jesus to us in ways that we could understand. He sought out the magi and revealed Jesus' Person and Mission to them through the star and Scripture. They never could have discovered this on their own if He hadn't revealed it by grace. It is God who took the initiative by His grace and revealed Jesus as eternal God as well as man. We realise that 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 people in Jerusalem did not. The same star will also lead us to Jesus our King and Lord.

A certain woman given much to piety had a dream. She was told that Jesus himself would come to her and she must prepare herself and wait for him. She got up very early, cleaned the house, kept things ready for the guest including a meal and waited for the Lord. As she was standing there with expectation a beggar woman came asking for food. The woman was annoyed and chased her out saying I am waiting for an important guest and come another day and I will help you. Then her neighbour came and asked for urgent help in some chores and she refused saying she was busy. Then a school boy came to her asking for some help as he was not able to get the necessary books and she refused. The day went on. Several people turned up at the gate and she found no Jesus coming. Sadly she went to sleep that night and in her dream the Lord came again and she began to complain to him telling how he had let her down. Jesus told her I came to you several times and you refused to recognize me. I was the beggar woman who was hungry, I was the neighbour who needed the help, and I was the school boy who needed support. Whatever you do to the little of my brothers you do it to me.

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