

[20] The Epiphany of the Lord

Readings: 1 *Isaiah 60:1-6 / Psalm 72 / Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6 / Matthew 2:1-12*

We are fascinated by the story of the three wise men that came to pay homage to Christ, the newborn king. Just as shepherds symbolized the Jewish people who had long awaited the coming of the Messiah; the magi represented the Gentiles, who would be included within the saving intervention of the Christ. The healing of a broken world would begin. The three magi have been called astrologers and later tradition referred them as kings. All earthly kings would be called to imitate the magi in bending the knee to the Christ Child.

We know little to nothing about the magi. They are men cloaked in mystery. Learned scribes, they have interpreted the ancient scrolls and prophecy. They follow a star and come to the scene of the nativity. Their benevolence is proven when by night they steal their way out of Bethlehem, suspicious of the intentions of the elder Herod. The warning they receive would be verified when Herod, fearful of being displaced by the newborn king, orders the massacre of the Holy Innocents. The gifts they bring were the typical offerings made to royalty or even to a deity. Just as today, gold was a precious metal. Frankincense was also employed by royalty and increasingly in worship as incense. Kings were typically anointed and myrrh was oil frequently used for this purpose. Isaiah's prophesy would be fulfilled: "Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD."

The magi came guided by a star, but the one who would one day be called the Star of the Sea, and who always summoned her children to Christ, was the Blessed Virgin Mary. They first visited Herod, and while he did not know where the promised one might be, it was apparent that he was familiar with the ancient foretelling. However, he was more a political animal than a man of faith. He allowed himself to be a dupe for Rome so as to maintain his kingdom; there was no way that he was going to allow his precarious situation to be disturbed by a new born king, especially not one augured to topple their enemies and to restore the Davidic kingdom. Note the odd disparity, these three foreigners had spent several years seeking the child of promise; and yet old Herod, a member of God's chosen people, neither sought nor wanted any part of him. This would remain the situation three decades later with another Herod and a crowd that would shout to the Roman procurator, "We have no God but Caesar!"

The telling intrigues us; but we do much to fill in the gaps. The Scriptures do not define the visitors as kings. Indeed, we are not given a number. Nevertheless, the legacy of tradition and imagination gives us three magi, even giving them names. Melchior of Persia carries the valuable gold. Gaspar (or Kaspar) of India offers frankincense. Balthasar of Arabia brings the myrrh. If the shepherds represent the Jewish poor, these men signify the Gentile rich. Traditionally, a spiritual meaning is given to the gifts. Gold represents Christ's royal identity. He will combine the Davidic kingship with the royal household of heaven. Frankincense is connected to priestly sacrifice. Christ would be the one true priest who would offer not the grain of the field or animals but his very self as the victim to atone for sin. While oil is used both to anoint kings and those called to priestly service, myrrh may have also prefigured Christ's death and the anointing of the body. It is argued that the anointing comes with the birth because Jesus is born

to die for you and me. It is also conjectured that the myrrh and anointing would have to come early in the story of Christ because there is no opportunity at the end when he rises from the dead. Similarly he is anointed in Bethany just prior to his betrayal by Judas. After his death, we read the following: "When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. They were saying to one another, 'Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, 'Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him.'" Our Lord begins his life in the stable of the nativity, little more than a cave on the side of the hill. He rises to eternal life in another cave, a tomb that could not contain him. As a vulnerable and dependent child others came to him. As the immortal and risen Christ he will go out to the entire world in Word and Sacrament. Present to all who would receive him in faith and grace, he would no longer appear to us face-to-face; however, we will never be orphaned and he promises to come again in glory.

What happened to the gifts? We do not know. While it is probably more representative of human fancy than historical truth, certain stories are told. One tale was that Joseph used the gold at the time of their flight into Egypt, both for the expense of the journey and to pay off or bribe one of the soldiers involved with the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents. If they treasured the frankincense or incense, they may have presented it as a gift to the priest at the temple when Jesus was twelve years old. As for the myrrh, it would seem likely that it was used to anoint Joseph's body for burial. His calling as the Lord's earthly foster father had come to an end. Joseph was a good man but even good men might sometimes get in the way, especially the one who was the protector of the Holy Family. He would have to leave the world before our Lord could begin his three years of ministry, a final journey that would take him to the Cross. Celebrating the Epiphany, I have a few questions we might reflect upon:

- Do we seek Christ and always answer the summons to worship him at Mass?
- Angels and then shepherds announced the Good News; have we done our part to transmit our saving faith to others?
- We gave and received gifts at Christmas; what (if anything) did we give Jesus?
- Would we let go of everything to possess Christ as our treasure, or are there things we would be unwilling to surrender?
- Old Herod placed his politics and self over faith and the Lord; where do we place the priority in our own lives?
- Do we discern the presence of Christ in the likeness of others, especially children, born and unborn?
- Are men inspired by Joseph to be responsible for their actions, faithful to their duties and respectful of women as he was to Mary?
- Do women realize their high calling in emulating Mary's assent to God and her maternal love?