

Epiphany + 7 January 2024 + Isa 60:1-6 + Eph 3:2-6 + Mt 2:1-12

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany, which recalls, among other events, the visit of the Magi—the “wise men”—to the infant Jesus. Epiphany means “*manifestation*”; and it celebrates the ways in which Jesus’ divine origin is made known to the world. In our Gospel, Jesus’ divine kingship is made known to the wise men from the East by the star of Bethlehem. But just as the star illuminated the Magi’s way to the Christ child, their own personal journey is also an image of all mankind’s search for God since the Fall; a story which leads to the Truth Who is Jesus Christ—Jesus who in fact came to find us.

Now first of all we must admit that we don’t know exactly who the Magi were. We don’t know where they were from, or even if there were 3 of them. They are shrouded in mystery, because they represent “all the nations”—or the Gentiles, coming to adore the one Lord. So let’s look a little more closely at what the Magi’s search for God reveals to us.

First, perhaps they were Babylonian (i.e. modern-day Iraq) priests or philosophers. Philosophy means “the love of wisdom”, and since the dawn of language, philosophy has been part of man’s search for God. Indeed St. Augustine, one of the greatest Christian theologians, was first a philosophical seeker. And yet philosophy can also lead man away from God—we need only think of the likes of Karl Marx here. But philosophy is not enough, because philosophy is only human—it is not inspired. The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, perhaps authored by the wise King Solomon, laments: *I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly...[but this is] a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow* (1:17-18).

Next, perhaps the Magi were astrologers, as hear the root word “Magi” in “magic” and “magician.” Magic uses human words to try to manipulate God’s creation by the power of the devil, the so-called ‘gods’, or ‘forces of nature’. Recourse to magic was somewhat understandable in a pre-scientific world, and yet even in our ultra-scientific day, people put their faith in superstitions like horoscopes, mediums, palm and tarot-card readers, and so on. Horoscopes and zodiacal signs were likely invented in ancient Babylon. And yet the very first line of the Book of Genesis boldly proclaims the truth: *in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*. In other words, the heavens and all “powers” of the earth have no power over the one true God.

Lastly, perhaps the Magi were closer to primitive astronomers. Many ancient peoples saw the planets and stars as gods. By the time of Christ’s birth, we know that the Babylonians had a considerably-developed ability to calculate the movement of planets. Around the time of Jesus’ birth, one famous astronomer has calculated a conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn as a sort of bright “star.” Now the god of the planet Jupiter was considered to be the god of Babylon, and Saturn was the representation of the Jews. So for this reason, the Magi may have looked for a new King in the Land of the Jews.

In reality, the Magi were probably a little of all 3—philosophers, astrologers, and astronomers. They used their primitive knowledge to seek the truth, and they were willing to follow that search wherever it led them. St. Edith Stein once wrote, *God is truth, and whoever seeks the truth is seeking God, whether he knows it or not*. But the Magi were indeed “wise men”, because they were open to God; they did not allow their search for truth to terminate in themselves. The Wise Men were probably not scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures, but they evidently knew that the holy prophets of the Jews had foretold that someday a *king of the Jews* would be born, who would be greater than all the other kings, and so deserving of their homage and adoration. The Magi recognized that in addition to their human knowledge, there is another kind of very real knowledge that comes from faith. This is a lesson our modern, agnostic world really needs to learn.

But before they came to Bethlehem, the Magi stop in Jerusalem to seek the advice of the Jewish religious authorities. And what happens next is tragic: we have two examples of what we might call “anti-wisdom,” or “anti-truth.” First, King Herod has no interest in adoring a new King of the Jews; his only concern is holding on to his earthly power. In fact, King Herod was so paranoid that he even executed 2 of his own sons, fearing their very lives as a threat to his power! Next, the chief priests and the scribes should have been overjoyed at the news of the Christ. But we hear nothing of that. Perhaps this is because they were only interested in placating Herod and securing their own power. Sadly, many people give up on the desire to know the truth, and settle instead for political expediency. But whenever a people seeks only power and *not* the truth, they doom themselves to their own demise. This too is a lesson our hyper-political world desperately needs to learn.

Now, in our culture so steeped in relativism, some might say that the magi’s journey reveals that the truth is to be discovered by each individual outside of any objective reality (hence that meaningless popular phrase: “my truth”). But that’s not at all what the Wise Men teach us. Rather, they show us that an honest personal quest for truth, which is important, will always end in *the Truth*: Jesus Christ. And Jesus is found in a visible, organized family, which we call the Church. The Magi come to Bethlehem, and find Jesus in a small but ordered community. *On entering the house*, Scripture says, *they saw the child with Mary his mother* and Joseph. And that small family was the first “manifestation” of the Church.

Finally, we come to perhaps the most important moment in the story of the Magi: *They prostrated themselves and did him homage*; that is, they worshipped. As we said during our Christmas celebrations, adoration is the best and only proper posture for all who encounter the holiness of God. Not only are we made to know God, but we were made to worship Him. Human history proves that if we worship anything or anyone else other than God, it will only end in violence. And when we find the truth, we must give Him our very best: gold for a king, frankincense for a God, and the burial spice myrrh for the One who died for us; that is, give ourselves completely to Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life.