

Sunday January 2, 2022

The Epiphany of our Lord

Parishioner Reflection

By: Edel Reid

“Every Nation on Earth Will Adore You Lord.” The Psalm today doesn’t say that every nation “should” adore, it says that every nation “will adore”. This is not an empty promise. It will come to pass. The story of today’s gospel and the feast we celebrate gives us some clues as to how we will get there.

This feast is interchangeably known as The Epiphany of our Lord; The Adoration of the Magi; The Visit of the Three Wise Men/Three Kings. Technically this feast day is January 6; however, we are celebrating on the nearest prior Sunday. Every time I read or listen to today’s gospel story, the track playing in the back of my mind is the well-known John Henry Hopkins Jr. Christmas carol: “We Three Kings of Orient are, Bearing gifts we traverse afar; field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder Star”. Legend and ancient writings have given the three kings different names; however, Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar are the names most referenced in the Western Church. All three are regarded as saints in the church and their feast day is celebrated today as well.

St. Matthew’s gospel is the only one of the four gospels to relate this story. St. Matthew doesn’t mention “Kings” at all - but refers to the travellers as “wise men,” a translation from the Greek “magos” or “magi” (plural). St. Matthew tells us they came from “the East”. According to various writers and saints (John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine and Justin Martyr, among others) the geographical origins of the wise men were places such as Persia, Babylonia, Arabia, and India. The point is that they were from the Gentile, pagan, oriental world. This was a different world from the world of the Jews. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict talks about the fact that amongst the pagans in the first century there was a rumour that there would be a great king to come out of the Jewish race. At that time, celestial phenomena was often taken as heralding portentous events or significant people. The wise men, rather than having kingdoms, were likely great philosophers, astronomers, astrologers, maybe even members of and advisers at royal courts. They saw the Star “at its rising” which meant they had been watching the skies intently in recent times, had the ability to read the signs in the heavens, and noticed something new. This contrasts with the more direct information the Chosen People had been given: a Covenant, prophets, revelations and the Law, all pointing to the coming of the Messiah.

We are not even told how many wise men there were. The number three is traditionally thought to be the case due to the fact there were three gifts. The specific time-frame is not given either –

the gospel does not describe them arriving twelve days after Christmas per se – but we know it was sometime after Jesus was born in Bethlehem and it was during the reign of King Herod. This Herod, by the way, is the first of six Herods mentioned in the New Testament, all related to one another, part of the Herodian dynasty, and each one as evil as the next. When Herod orders the slaughter of the Innocents he mandates the murder of all infant boys two years and under. He calculates that the age of Jesus could be anything up to two years, given the information he received from the wise men as to the timing of the “rising” of the Star. It is also worthy of note that by the time the wise men got to Jesus to adore him, Mary and Jesus were no longer in the nativity stable/cave; they were in a house.

Nearing Jerusalem after their long journey, the wise men might have been tempted to think they had made a terrible mistake – the Star disappeared on them and no one seemed to know anything about a new King of the Jews. St. John Chrysostom interprets the disappearance of the Star as God’s way of spreading the tidings of the Messiah in Jerusalem itself. The wise men were forced to make inquiries and engage with the local authorities.

The fact that the Magi announced to Herod that they had come to do the newborn King of the Jews homage, troubled Herod and all of Jerusalem. And no wonder, for one pays homage to the divine. So they were not just talking about an earthly king. Matthew wants to emphasize that Jesus was the Messiah, so he is deliberately referencing passages from the Old Testament here, namely Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72 which talk about Kings coming from far off lands to adore the Messiah. The chief priests and scribes would have been very familiar with these Messianic prophecies. When asked by Herod where the Messiah was to be born, the chief priests quote the prophet Micah and correctly name Bethlehem as the birth place. Of course, this is significant since it was also the birth place of King David. The Star itself is also referred to in the Old Testament in the Book of Numbers which talks about a Star coming “forth out of Jacob”. This is known as the prophecy of the Star and may have been known to the Jews and the pagans alike.

After a period of darkness, the Star re-appeared. The Magi were overjoyed and followed it again until it stopped over Jesus. Despite the external appearance and lack of royal trappings – the lack of a royal court, a palace, any pomp and circumstance – they didn’t have second thoughts when they saw the Child Jesus and His Mother. They didn’t hesitate, and they didn’t come before Him empty-handed. They offered their gifts: gold to acknowledge his royalty; frankincense for His divinity; myrrh to signify suffering and sacrifices – both that of Jesus and their own.

The Magi represent the Gentile world – the world beyond the borders of the Chosen Race. The Magi represent us. The Journey of the Magi is not a one-time, long-ago, far-off historical event. It is our story. We should look up and lock our internal radar on the one true Star. We could easily sing together in Our Lady of Grace: “We Three Kings of Aurora are “. Which Star are we following? The true Star or different glittery lights that lead us down different paths.

“Modern society wants comfort and safety.” We will ignore signs because to follow them would look imprudent. Well, sometimes what looks imprudent from our worldly perspective is actually holy prudence. The long journey of the Magi was probably not prudent, comfortable, nor safe. We have a lot to learn from the Magi. Drop everything when we see a sign – through prayerful discernment – that we recognize as a sign from God. Don’t count the cost, don’t look back, don’t waiver. It may end up being a long, long winding road. The sign may even hide itself from us temporarily in order for us to make an effort. If we lose sight of this Star, we must get busy. We must search for it as diligently as Mary and Joseph searched for the child Jesus in last Sunday’s gospel, after losing Him in Jerusalem. We can pray to these three “wise” saints, to intercede for us in this regard. If we lose our way, don’t be afraid to ask for help – it was perseverance that helped the Magi finally locate the King of the Jews.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen noted that the two groups of people who were told of the Messiah’s birth were Shepherds and Wise Men: shepherds being people who know they know nothing, and Wise Men being people who are wise enough to know they don’t know everything. In other words, both groups are marked by humility. Humility is the key.

Archbishop Sheen also points out that Jesus came at Christmas to make us new men and women - to change our natures. The wise men were changed utterly after their encounter with Jesus – symbolized by the fact that “they departed for their country by another way”. They did not go back to their old ways.

Sources: Dr. Brant Pitre, Msgr. J. S. Cla Dias, Archbishop F. Sheen, St. John Chrysostom, Pope Benedict, Bl. Anne C. Emmerich