

Sunday January 3, 2021

Epiphany of the Lord

By: Kerry Tucker

Today we celebrate Epiphany. The word, “Epiphany” comes from the Greek *epiphaneia*, which means “manifestation” (“Epiphany”, Britannica Online Encyclopedia) or “divine appearances” (Connell, M. F. “Epiphany, The Solemnity of”, New Catholic Encyclopedia). Other names for Epiphany include “Feast of the Epiphany”, “Theophany” and, most literally, perhaps, “Three Kings’ Day”. Most literally, because on this day, in part, we remember “the first manifestation of Jesus...to the Gentiles” as symbolized by the Magi. (“Epiphany”, Britannica Online Encyclopedia, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Epiphany>).

The wisemen’s visit is one of the aspects of the nativity story most enjoyed by all it seems perhaps because it is usually thought of as the climax of the story; Mary and Joseph have finished their journey to Bethlehem, they have found a place for Mary to have her baby, Jesus has been born and in Luke’s account, the local shepherds have come to the place to worship him (Luke 2:8-20). And the denouement is the arrival of the three Magi who have come a great distance to worship, this “king of the Jews” and bring him gifts of great value in keeping with his worth. But is the arrival of the Magi and the giving of their gifts to the Christ child the end of the nativity story?

Unfortunately, it is not. The nativity story is framed by another tale. Tradition, as in the alternate name for Epiphany, Three Kings Day, seems to have come to regard the Magi as Kings. So, it might be said that the Magi’s tale is about three Kings. But the tale that begins and ends the story of Christ’s birth in the Gospel reading today is about a fourth King. It is about King Herod “and all Jerusalem” who, unlike the Three Kings was “frightened” by the news that the Magi had come to worship a “child born King of the Jews”. It may seem natural that King Herod would have been frightened by the news of a rival for his throne. And it probably was. But the Magi did bring the news to King Herod and the people of Jerusalem before they went to Bethlehem. As mentioned already, according to Luke’s account of these events, an angel brought the same news of Jesus’ birth to the local shepherds. It is probably the case that the arrival of the wisemen from afar would have seemed almost as miraculous to King Herod as

the “multitude of heavenly host” did to the shepherds. And yet King Herod’s response in the end was the antithesis of the shepherds’ response. The shepherds, after the angels departed, “said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us’” and so they did, “with haste” (Luke 2: 15). King Herod, by contrast, was “infuriated” when the Magi, having been “warned in a dream”, failed to return to Jerusalem with news of where to find the Christ child. And so he stayed in his Jerusalem palace and sent soldiers to Bethlehem instead to kill innocents (Matt. 2: 16-18).

On this Epiphany Sunday, we may want to ask ourselves, which of the Kings’ responses to the news of God’s appearance in the world do we want to have? Because, in the end, Three Kings’ Day appears to really be about five Kings; the Three Kings, King Herod and “the child who was born King of the Jews”. And the fifth King, that is, Christ the King, is not like King Herod and so many other powerful figures or peoples in human history who have coveted power, have rejected God’s messengers and his Son, and so, have often ended up, murdering the defenseless. No, Christ the King, as is suggested in today’s Psalm, is not that kind of a King. “For he delivers the needy one who calls, the poor and the one who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy” (Psalm 72:12-13)