

## THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

*Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12*

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### REFLECTION 1:

### A GOD FOR ALL PEOPLES

Through the centuries, a variety of interesting legends have grown up around this feast of the Epiphany. Most legends agree that there were three Magi. If they were Persians they would have belonged to a caste of sages of the Zoroastrian religion, a caste that believed in the coming of the Messiah. One of these legends was related by the explorer Marco Polo, who gave their names as Balthazar, Caspar and Melchior. They entered a cave guided by a star and there discovered a man, a young woman and a newborn infant.

Matthew is the only one of the Evangelists to report the episode of the Magi who came from the East to give homage to 'the king of the Jews', whose 'star they observed at its rising' (Matt 2: 1-12). This same Evangelist covers five episodes that refer to the prophecies of the Old Testament: the virginal conception of the Lord, the adoration of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem and the surrounding area and the return to Nazareth, recalling what had been said by the prophets –'He shall be called a Nazarean'. For Matthew and for all Christians, Bethlehem is famous among all cities because the Lord was born there, though at that time considered a relatively small village.

Much of the Old Testament sheds light on the writings and events of the New, most of all on Christ himself: his person, his mystery and his teaching. The full meaning of the Old Testament is discovered in the light of the New. Strange, but Herod alone takes the information seriously. He understands the title 'king of the Jews' in a purely temporal sense, imagining that the newborn child is a threat to his throne.

Matthew tells us all we need to know, that from the time of this coming into the world, the Lord was shown to people who came from distant lands. God made the good news of this birth known to them by a suitable sign, a star, which guided their journey. Later, St. Paul in Athens, addressing the members of the Areopagus, said to them: 'What you are thus worshipping in ignorance, I intend to make known to you ... the Lord of Heaven and Earth'. (Acts 17). The Magi who have come from the East to give homage to the newborn 'king of the Jews' offer him presents, 'gifts' of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Christian tradition attributed additional meanings to these gifts. St. Irenaeus wrote that myrrh signified that the Messiah would be vulnerable, would die and be buried; gold that he was the King whose reign would be without end, incense that he was God and came to make himself known to humankind and be worshipped.

Matthew says nothing about what may have happened to the Magi after their visit except that they received a message in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route. 'God has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. May you experience the Lord's kindness and blessings and be strong in faith, in hope and in love. The wise men followed the star, and found Christ who is light from light. May you too find the Lord when your pilgrimage is ended'.

## **REFLECTION 2: THE MAGIS' STORY IS OURS**

All December long, we have been awash with Christmas card images of kings riding camels across the desert following a star. Also popular are manger scenes with kneeling kings worshipping at the crib, displaying gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We have stood before our own parish cribs and have tried to imagine the most wonderful night of the year. Then gradually the images fade. Maybe this year as we leave Christmas behind, and step out into the rain and the cold, we are called to be modern-day magi – kings who step into these images and bring them to life in our own time and place. The magi made the extraordinary effort to travel a great distance across unknown lands while following a star. That star of the Holy Spirit will surely guide us as well. We can then offer our lives to the real King.

As we assemble today around God's living word and the living bread of the Eucharist, we hear Isaiah (Isa 60: 1-6) sharing his vision of a host of nations streaming towards Jerusalem, He describes gift-bearing riders on camels, proclaiming God's praises. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians (Eph 3: 2-6) makes known 'the mystery' that gentiles and Jews, that is all the people of the earth are members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospels. As we listen to Matthew's Gospel (Matt 2: 1-12) we might think that Isaiah's vision has already been realised and that Paul's 'mystery' has already been revealed. Sadly, reality attests otherwise. We make war, not peace, we build walls instead of bridges and instead of reaching out we keep our distance. We are not united but divided and so bear counter-witness to the God in whom we are all one.

For this reason, it is good for us to enter into the spirit of today's feast and to renew our efforts to come together in the Lord. One way we can do this is to recognise that the story of the magi is the story of each one of us. Their timeless tale follows the storyline of everybody. Like the magi every human person is born with a call that must be answered, a vision to be followed, a goal to be achieved. In order to respond to that call each of us must be willing to journey from home and family and make our way into the unknown future. Inevitably, that journey will entail risk. There will be obstacles along the way, detours and even dead ends that entail that we start all over again. There will be other people on that same journey; some will turn out to be helpful while others delay progress, either openly or through deceit. Notice the role that Herod played in today's Gospel. He was deeply upset by the birth of a child in whom the prophesies of a Saviour would

be fulfilled. So, while plotting murder in his heart, he appeared plausible to the magi. We will also encounter 'Herods' who come in the guise of those who preach that there is nothing beyond this life and that all is an illusion – 'lie back and ignore the plight of the needy', they would whisper. Along with the Herods, however, there will be helpers who support our journey and just as the magi who were guided by a shining star and by the overtures of God in a dream, so will our paths be lit and our journeys made easier by the gifts God sends on our way. As we respond to God's call we will not be travelling alone, fellow travellers will support us.

Like the magi, we too must be willing to bring gifts along with us to offer to God. The greatest gift we bear is our willingness to accept the mystery that we are all one in Christ and the surrender of that mistrust, ignorance and prejudice that cause us to reject those we do not understand. So, let us embrace one another and make our way home together to God. The magi found what they were looking for – so will we all if we follow the star, the Spirit of the Living God to guide us.