

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 his 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: SPIRITUAL GUIDES

In recent years, peoples' attempts to trace their roots and fill in the branches of their family tree have been greatly helped by the website, ancestry.com. They can now search through a wealth of public records to find the 'who' and the 'where' of family origins. Today the sacred texts and their authors offer us an opportunity to trace, not our physical roots, but our spiritual ones right back to those featured in today's readings. We can find ourselves in the vision of Isaiah travelling by caravan to the Holy City. We can revel in the mystery made known by the Ephesus author: that we are co-heirs, members of the same body and partners in the same promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. We can also admire and follow the magi from the east that travelled long and far to find the One who would be shepherd of God's people, Israel. Obviously those of us who are not Jewish were not the first to come and party as it were. However, we can trace our roots to the gentile community and assure ourselves that we are not an afterthought on God's part. The light of the Lord's glory shines on all of us as was intended from the very beginning.

As we look on those who have gone before us what do we find? We find that they were not afraid to believe in visions and place their hopes in God's promises. Isaiah the prophet took great comfort and pride in the promise that all nations would walk in God's light and the fact that this promise has not yet been fully realized should not prevent our hoping that one day it will. In the figures of the maji from the east, we see the beginning of the promises' fulfilment. They follow a star; eloquent testimony of God's saving concerns. It takes daring and courage to set out on life's journey and in a world where travel was not convenient and could be dangerous; they allowed themselves to be led. They were not afraid of Herod or fooled by his plotting. They followed the signal of a rising star and were open to accepting the revelation that came from a dream. When at last the maji did find Jesus and Mary, they gave gifts worthy of a king, their genuine faith contrasting sharply with the lip service of Herod. In the maji we see knowledge affirmed by faith.

As we remember their story today let us allow these maji, our spiritual ancestors to inspire our faith daring and courage and a willingness to hope in God's promises. With the appearance of Jesus, the ultimate epiphany (manifestation) of God's glory and through his saving mission, the dark clouds of sin and death have been banished. Only through Jesus and his church continuing the epiphany of his love can the alienation and aggression that threatens the unity of all people be overcome. Through baptism and our incorporation into Christ, the Spirit of God dwells within us. We are luminous with God's light and glory.