

Matthew 2:1-12, The Epiphany of the Lord

Year C, January 5th & 6th, 2019

Today the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. I would like to start out with a couple of good definitions for “epiphany” from Merriam-Webster:

- 1) A usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature of something.
- 2) An intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking.

The simple and striking event that we are celebrating today is the manifestation of Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world.¹ The Gospel reading the Church gives us for the Solemnity of the Epiphany is the great story of the Magi or Wise Men from the East who follow a star that leads them, first to the court of King Herod, and then ultimately to a house in Bethlehem, where they find the true king they have been seeking.

Who are the Magi and where did they come from? Well, we don’t know exactly, the Gospel doesn’t say other than they were from the East. The Greek word used was “Magos”, and in Latin, the plural is “Magi”, which meant, *Ancient wise men who were specialists in dream interpretation, astrology, and sometimes magic.*² There are nonbiblical, sources that say magi were associated primarily with Persia, where they were members of a priestly class learned in astrology and other magical arts.³ We do get some hints about who the Magi were from the prophecies we hear in our First Reading and in the Responsorial Psalm for today. In the First Reading Isaiah speaks of a coming time of the Lord when his glory would rise upon Israel,

¹ CCC 528

² Hahn, S. (Ed.). (2009). In [the Catholic Bible Dictionary](#) (p. 565). New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday.

³ Powell, M. A. (2011). [magi](#). In M. A. Powell (Ed.), *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)* (Third Edition, p. 587). New York: HarperCollins.

and their light would shine to all nations and kings would walk in the brightness of that light.

Verse 6 specifically says, “⁶ *A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*”⁴

Our Responsorial Psalm for today, Psalm 72, speaks of a new King, a new Solomon who would live for all generations and in verses 10-11 says, “¹⁰ *May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!* ¹¹ *May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him*”⁵

It is from these prophecies that speak of these foreign kings coming to Israel bearing gifts of gold and frankincense, who will fall down before Israel’s king, that the Church’s tradition sees Matthew’s Magi as Kings. What we can say from our Gospel story is that these Magi obviously studied the stars and were intensely interested in their meaning. They somehow were aware that the star they had observed was connected to a prophesized newly born “King of the Jews”, causing them to embark on their adventure to seek him out. Their journey took them to the great city of Jerusalem and to an encounter with their first king, King Herod, the reigning king of the Jews.

There were several Herods in the Scriptures, but this gospel is referring to "Herod the Great" who ruled Jerusalem from around 37 BC up until just after the time of the birth of Christ. Herod is a fascinating historical figure. His family was not Jewish, they were Idumean, from the land of Edom, and had become prominent by serving the Roman governors of the time. Herod the great was a consummate politician, eventually winning the patronage of the Roman political

⁴ [Catholic Daily Readings](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.

⁵ [Catholic Daily Readings](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.

and military leader Marc Antony, whose troops helped him take Jerusalem, and become king; albeit a king under the control of Rome. Herod deftly switched alliances, when Marc Antony was defeated by Octavius, the eventual Caesar Augustus, at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, enabling him to hold onto his throne in Judea.

The Catholic Bible Dictionary describes Herod as being, “*Suspicious of all enemies, especially those within his kingdom, Herod presided over a tyrannical and at times paranoid regime. His foreign origins made him unpopular with his Jewish subjects, ... Consumed by fears of conspiracies, he had many in the royal household executed, including his wife, Mariame, and three sons, as well as many subjects who were accused of conspiring against him.*”⁶

I hope that this helps you understand that when the Wise Men showed up in Jerusalem asking, “*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*”, this not only troubled Herod but all of Jerusalem as well. When Herod was troubled, bad things happened to the people around him. I hope you also understand that after asking about where the Christ was to be born and then telling the Wise Men to go to Bethlehem to find the child, and then to come back and let him know where the child was, so he too could worship him, he really didn’t mean it. Any rightful heir to King David’s throne was a terrible threat to Herod.

After their encounter with Herod, we are told the Magi went their way; “*and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.*”¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*⁷” This last verse is one that struck me, “*When they saw the star, they rejoiced*

⁶ Hahn, S. (Ed.). (2009). In [the Catholic Bible Dictionary](#) (p. 358). New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday.

⁷ Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain). (1994). [The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition](#) (Mt 2:9-10). New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

exceedingly with great joy.” This is just a little different from the Gospel Reading you just heard. This translation is from the RSV Catholic Edition (RSVCE) and I really like it because it has the sense of the almost inexpressible joy the Wise Men experienced upon reaching their destination, entering the house, and finding the child with Mary His mother. Their long arduous journey was over, their seeking was done, they had found what they had been looking for, they had found their king. And once they had found Him, they did what seemed most natural to them, *“they prostrated themselves and did him homage.”* Here the RSVCE translates this verse as *“they fell down and worshiped Him.”* Again, two slightly different translations, where one seems to emphasize more the kingship of Jesus and the other more so is a recognition of His divinity. Certainly, both translations are correct; Jesus is both God and King, both divine and human. The key take away is that the Magi’s joy at finding their God and king is transformed into worship of Him.

The message of the Epiphany is a message of joy. It is the message of the nations of the world discovering the Christ child. It is the joy of Christmas going out to all the world. The Catechism tells us, *“In the magi, representatives of the neighboring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation. The magi’s coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations.”*⁸

What the Epiphany means to us today is that God has entered into our world. He came at a particular time, 2000 years ago, in a particular place, the village of Bethlehem in the Kingdom of Judah, in a particular circumstance, born of a Virgin, born in poverty, born under the rule of a

⁸ Catholic Church. (2000). [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) (2nd Ed., pp. 133-134). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

tyrant who is seeking His death, in order to set us free from the chains of sin and death. What this means to us is that God has not forgotten His people. He has kept his promises; His promise to Abraham, that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him, and His promise to David that he would have an heir that would rule forever. In the Epiphany, we, the Gentiles, enter into the heritage of those promises to Israel. The Epiphany means God has not abandoned us. He has entered into our world to bring us salvation and peace. It means we are not the result of some cosmic accident, doomed to a short and brutal life that ends in nothingness. We are created by God, to be in union with Him, as beloved Sons and Daughters through Jesus Christ. In Him, our lives are meant to have great meaning and purpose, and that meaning and purpose can be found. We find it when we love and serve Him, by loving and serving our neighbors. In Him, what we do with our lives matters and matters greatly. God desires us to have lives of abundance, both now and in eternity. The joy of the Epiphany is the joy of Christmas; it is the joy of the Gospel.

The Magi went to great lengths to seek out and find the true King of the Jews, the true Savior of the World. When they found Him, they experienced an overwhelming joy, which found expression in their worship and adoration of the Christ child. We, too, can find that same joy and that same divine presence, and we don't need to go on a long and arduous journey. In His great mercy, our Lord Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us. In that same Divine Mercy, He will become manifest; in a particular time, **today, now, at this Mass**; in a particular place, **right here, in our midst, in this Church, at this Eucharistic table**; in whatever particular circumstance or struggle you may find yourself; **He comes to be with you**. May the joy of the Epiphany fill our hearts, as we prepare to welcome and receive Him today. Oh, come let us adore Him.