

Epiphany 2020 SSP

St. Matthew 2:1-12

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Epiphany, the journey of the Magi, the Three Wise Men, to the newborn Christ in Bethlehem, is a major feast of the Church. It is the beginning of a new liturgical season until we reach Lent, and it is also the climax of Christmastide. So we do well today at Saint Stephen's to anticipate the feast this second Sunday after Christmas Day. In the Eastern churches, Epiphany really is the celebration equal to or greater than the Nativity itself, wherein the Infant Jesus manifests his glory to the nations as personified by the Magi. This is also true in Spanish-speaking Christendom, where the Epiphany is as great a celebration as Christmas.

Epiphany means Manifestation, in this case the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Jesus thereby reveals himself, even as a newborn child, not only as Messiah of Israel but as Lord and God of the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples of the earth, who very soon after Christ and his Apostles became the preponderant members of his Church.

Saint Matthew's story of the Journey of the Magi, which is unique to his Gospel, is full of meaning worth knowing and cherishing. First of all, he does not say there were three wise men, but tradition has assumed there were three because of the three gifts that were presented to Christ: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tradition has added their three names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, representing the races of mankind. And the beloved hymn, "We Three Kings" actually puts this very clearly and beautifully, as each king describes his gift. Gold for a King. Frankincense for God. Myrrh for a Sacrifice.

A second thing to notice is that the Magi begin their journey by their Gentile arts and sciences. They are stargazers. They see a great star, or perhaps as some have fascinatingly

argued, a great comet, crossing the sky. They somehow divine it is a king of the Jews to be born, and having seen his star in the east, make their way to Judea. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi," is highly to be recommended as a meditation on their journey and their feelings as they also make an inward journey from seeking to believing.

When the Magi get to Judea, being kings they naturally go to King Herod, who rules Judea under the auspices of the overlords of the Roman Empire. "Where is he who is born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." Herod is alarmed by this news, but he also is an instrument (though a dangerous one) of Providence as he summons the Jewish scribes to tell where the Scriptures say the Messiah, the Christ, is to be born. So we have gone from Gentile arts to the Hebrew Scriptures. The answer from the prophet Micah is Bethlehem in Judea, King David's hometown. So Herod, desiring to destroy the child, tells the wise men secretly, When you find him, come tell me where he is, that I may worship him also.

So the Magi, aided by both devout Gentile reason and by the revelation of Holy Scripture, and by the movement of the star, find Christ and his mother, and they present their three gifts. But they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they go home by another way. God will also warn the Holy Family to flee, once Herod realizes that the wise men are not going to return to him. He will commit an atrocity, the Slaughter of the Innocents, which prefigures Jesus's entire life of Sacrifice, especially at the end.

But the wise men return home by another way in a deeper sense. They have sought, and found, and worshiped Christ. They have made a long inward as well as a long outward journey. Eliot's poem which I mentioned earlier has them say they returned to their places, their old kingdoms, no longer feeling at home "in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching

their gods.” They felt they had seen death as well as birth. They saw Christ’s birth, and in so seeing, they experienced a death, “our own death,” the death of their former way of life; and the speaker, speaking for the Magi as a whole, finishes, “I should be glad of another death.”

Once you have really seen Christ, you are not the same. You have seen a glory and a life that is meant to be yours but cannot be had unless you receive it as a gift. And the means of reception is itself also a gift, the gift of faith. Let us each cherish that gift, the gift of faith, and pray that above all we are given the gift of final perseverance to reach the end of our own journeys, wanting above all to go home to our Lord.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.