

Epiphany - B
Isaiah 60:1-6;
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6;
Matthew 2:1-12
Little Flower - 1/7/24

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. In Western Christianity, Christmas has always been the primary celebration of Christ's birth. However, in Eastern Christianity, Epiphany has been the primary celebration of Christ's birth. In fact, the Church has celebrated Epiphany longer than it has celebrated Christmas.

In the early Church, both in the East and the West, the feast of the Epiphany celebrated three events in Jesus' life: the visit of the magi, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John the Baptist, and the miracle at the wedding feast of Cana. Today in Western Christianity the Epiphany only celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles symbolized by the magi.

We have always been fascinated by the magi. Who were they? Although we sometimes refer to them as the "three kings," nothing suggests that they were kings in the sense of rulers. From the writings of the ancient historian Herodotus, we can conclude that the magi in the Gospels were probably part of a Median tribe that had become a tribe of priests and the teachers and instructors of the Persian kings. Magi were skilled in philosophy, medicine, and natural science. They were also soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. In all probability, the magi of the Gospels really were "wise men." How many were there? The Gospel does not tell us. The number three probably was chosen because of the three gifts.¹

Each of the three gifts reveal something of the mystery and meaning of Christ. According to William Barclay, gold is the gift for a king. Jesus is the universal King who reigns over our hearts not by force but by love, not from a throne but from the cross. Frankincense is the gift for a priest. Jesus is the eternal High Priest who offered his life to God for us once and for all. Finally, myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. Jesus is the Savior of the world through his death and resurrection.²

On a deeper level, Christmas focuses on the historical event of Jesus' birth. Epiphany focuses on the meaning of his birth. Christmas celebrates Jesus' manifestation to the Jews as represented by the shepherds. Epiphany celebrates Jesus' manifestation to the Gentiles, i.e., to the peoples of the world, represented by the magi.

What is the meaning of Jesus' birth? It is the great mystery to which Paul was referring in today's second reading, *"that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."* This is what Isaiah prophesied in today's first reading. *"Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance.... your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses."*

In other words, the great mystery, then, is that by becoming human, Jesus came to reconcile all people with God but also to reconcile all people with one another. However, the reconciliation Jesus came to bring was not only religious reconciliation. The shepherds and the magi did not only represent religious differences. Their worlds, their culture, their lifestyles were completely different. The shepherds were probably poor, uneducated, and very rough. The magi were probably wealthy, educated, and very polished. Religious differences meant more to the people of Jesus' time; socio-economic differences mean more to us.

My brothers and sisters, this week I have thought a lot about the journey of the magi. Like Abraham in the Old Testament, they set out on a journey for an unknown destination. They followed a mysterious star. We need to ask ourselves what star do we follow or, better, whose star do we follow. Who or what gives direction to our lives? Our answer should be Christ, the light of the world. At the same time, I would suggest that each of us is called to be a star, a light, that leads others to Christ. Jesus calls us to be lights to the world. Today and every day we are called to be the epiphany, the manifestation, of Christ to the world.

1. William Barclay's commentary on Matthew 2:1,2 in *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1 and 2*, the *Daily Study Bible Series*, Revised Edition, Bible Companion Software (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc.).
2. William Barclay's commentary on Matthew 2:9-12.