

January 5, 2020

The Epiphany of the Lord Matthew 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Background:

The first chapter of Matthew's gospel ends with Joseph carrying out the instructions he had received in a dream. "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus." (Matthew 1:24-25) By transitioning from Joseph being encouraged in dream to take Mary and her child into his home to the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem, Matthew skips over many parts of the Christmas story that are most appealing. There is a temptation to fill in the missing familiar details, not paying particular attention to Matthew's unique presentation. But to do so misses the opportunity to enter Matthew's perspective and the wisdom to be gleaned there.

Matthew's unique presentation of the birth of Jesus includes details like Joseph accepting Mary into his home as his wife, and the possibility of Mary being sent away in quiet disgrace. He also reports that it is Joseph who gives the child the name Jesus, the name Luke reports was given to Mary at the annunciation. "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." (Luke 1:31) Matthew has also skipped over such events as the census, not finding room in the city and therefore seeking shelter in a manger, the angels declaring the birth, and the shepherds' experience of the scene. Matthew does not even name Mary in telling us of the birth of Jesus. Despite not having relations with Mary, Joseph takes on the responsibility of the child as if he were his son, and gives him the name Jesus. But Matthew provides other details that will help his audience understand how God has been unfolding God's plan in the birth of this child. Some of Matthew's details are present in today's gospel text.

The Magi were part of the gentile world into which Jesus was born. They were influential men who studied the heavens for clues to the meaning of life. They functioned as political and religious advisers to the rulers of the Median and later the Persian empires. At one point in Persian history, the Magi revolted and replaced their king, demonstrating their importance within their culture. Given that they were looking for a person of significance, it is no surprise that they would first go to Jerusalem, the center of the religious and political world of Judea.

But Jesus is an entirely different kind of king, and therefore was not to be found in Jerusalem, but rather in the small isolated community of Bethlehem. When the Magi arrived there and entered the house, they first saw the child with his mother, and then prostrated themselves before the infant. Matthew has described this encounter

between the Magi and the child Jesus in such a way that his audience recognizes that even those without the benefit of their sacred tradition are able to recognize the hand of God at work here. Creation itself is revealing the way, so that those who are open and seek the ways of God can recognize what has taken place. Who these Magi were, their names, and how many there were--these details that have been added later are not described by Matthew.

The Magi are important because they help establish that the whole world was affected by what God had done, and now that they have done so, they can fade into history. Having discovered the child, they pay him homage, offer their gifts, and then step aside so that God can unravel God's divine plan. The magi are much like Simeon and Anna in Luke's gospel, who have waited faithfully most of their lives. Once the magi have seen the hand of God at work in the child Jesus, they praise God, and then they depart by another route. "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all the people, a light for revelations to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

The Magi's response to the birth of Jesus is in sharp contrast to that of King Herod, the living and reigning King of Judea. Herod knows that he has not fathered an heir. Therefore, the news that there exists a newborn heir is not welcome. Herod is also different from the Magi in that he is merely a puppet ruler for Rome, while the Magi have esteem and authority in their society. While the Magi have only a star that signals the birth of a person of importance, Herod has advisors who know of the prophecies about the birth of the messiah. But Herod's advisors seem to be oblivious to the fact that the child has arrived. Herod's reaction is one of distress, and he is not moved to personal action. Rather, with a deceitful claim for his motive, he directs the Magi to bring him the information he needs. The Magi have taken on the difficult and dangerous task of leaving their homeland to track down the person whom the star's appearance signifies. They have brought precious gifts that indicate his importance, and they bow before him. Herod keeps his intention secret, and in secret he asks the Magi to supply him with information he will need.

The Magi and Herod represent two very different responses to the presence of Jesus. Those who have the advantage of being familiar with the religious traditions are unable to identify who Jesus is. They respond with fear, and, as we know the story, even murder of the innocent. Those without the benefit of being familiar with the religious tradition are willing take on personal risk. They recognize the significance of this infant's birth: God's love is powerful and pervasive--it will not be thwarted. They offer the gifts that they have, bow reverently, and take their leave.

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you know about how your conception was received by your parents and their families?
2. Are you aware of couples who have greeted the news of a pregnancy with joy? Why was this an occasion of joy?
3. Do you also know couples for whom the news of being pregnant was a source of distress? Why was this a source of stress and concern for them?
4. How does having a newborn affect its parents, the family, and the community into which it arrives? (Take time to consider both the positive and the negative impacts.)
5. Recall some of the recent times when you have been in the presence of infants. Was their presence a source of delight and blessing, or disturbance and burden? Why?
6. The Magi were comfortable enough with the darkness to study changes in the night sky. What are the areas of darkness in your own life today?
7. Imagine yourself arriving with the Magi in Bethlehem. What would you like to offer?
8. Can you take some time now to talk with God about your attitude toward the birth of a child in theory, and the reality of the demands a newborn makes on parents, families, and communities; your willingness to spend your resources for the life and development of children, or how foreigners have brought new perspective on life to you?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister

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Excerpts from the readings for January 5, 2020, The Epiphany of the Lord

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory.
Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance.
Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you:
your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses.
Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow,
for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you.
Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah;
all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.

*Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son;
He shall govern your people with justice and your afflicted ones with judgment.
Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.
The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.
All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him.
For he shall rescue the afflicted; he shall have pity for the lowly and the poor.*

Brothers and sisters:
You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit, namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation. It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and came to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he asked the chief priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: from you, Bethlehem, shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." They set out, and the star that they had seen came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Excerpts from Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; and Matthew 2:1-12