

SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

St. Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. The word “epiphany” is Greek meaning “to manifest” or “to show” for it was the new-born baby that revealed or showed God to all the world. Epiphany marks the twelfth day of Christmas, as it is traditionally celebrated on January 6.

The Magi, often referred to as kings or wise men, and traditionally named Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, came from the East, most likely Persia, modern-day Iran, and were properly speaking a class of priests who saw in the movement of the stars and planets the annunciation of major events. Coming from the East they were not Jews and so were held to be foreigners, or Gentiles, and it is because of this that this feast of the Epiphany is significant for it marks the revelation of God in the birth of Christ to the Gentiles—the people of all the world. Whereas at Christmas the incarnation was made manifest to the Jews represented by the shepherds, at Epiphany the incarnation was made manifest to the gentiles represented by the Magi.

When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem they seek out King Herod, as do any visiting dignitaries do today in meeting the head of state when visiting a foreign nation, but in asking to see the child born King of the Jews they undermine King Herod’s position by announcing to him a rival to his rule, for Herod considered himself to be the King of the Jews. And remember, it was this title, King of the Jews, which Pontius Pilate had placed on the cross at Christ’s crucifixion.

At the birth of Christ celebrated on Christmas Day as the Nativity of the Lord the angels made known to the shepherds, the lowest people among the Jews, that their king, the saviour of the world, God incarnate, had been born.

On this the feast of Epiphany, the star of Bethlehem tells to the Magi, the great men of the foreign nations, that a king has been born—a king so great that they must travel across the middle-east to pay Him homage.

Epiphany not only commemorates the revelation of God to the Gentiles, it announces a new world order. These Magi confront King Herod and announce to him that the true King of the Jews has been born. The old order of occupation and enslavement to foreign powers and tyrannical rule of unfaithful priests, images of the rule of sin, has been broken by the manifestation of God and the transformation this heralds of the rule of grace. It is a moment so significant that it demands that attention of these three kings, who beheld God not to be the God of the Jews, but the God of their own people. So mammoth is the birth of this child that these kings even quote the scriptures of these Jewish, and for them, foreign people: “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” (*Mt. 2:6*). Here, their homage shows that the God of Israel, was truly the God of all people and of all the world. The prophesy itself is a combination of the prophecy of Micah and Samuel: “But you, O’ Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel” (*Micah 5:2*), and “It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel” (*II Sam. 5:2*).

Here, born in a stable was the king of kings, born in one of the lowliest towns of Judah, Bethlehem, whose annunciation was heralded by the angels of heaven to the lowliest people in Israel, the shepherds, but to whom these three great men of an eastern empire would kneel before, offering him gifts as foretold in the Psalms: “the kings of Seba and Sheba bring gifts” (*Ps. 72:10*) and in the prophet Isaiah: “all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and frankincense” (*Is. 60:6*); the gold of kings, the frankincense of priests, and the myrrh of prophets and of death. For that is what Christ was and is: priest, prophet and king. The High Priest of the religion of grace, the Prophet of the

kingdom of God, and the King of all Kings. By virtue of His life, His death, and His resurrection we too, by virtue of our baptism, share in this three-fold mission of God. For as it is said in rite of Baptism: "As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of His body, sharing everlasting life."

So often we fail to recognise the wise amongst us. It is why people would ask, surprised by His wisdom, "is not this Joseph's son?" (*Lk.* 4:21) and why the Lord would say, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown," (*Lk.* 4:24) and why St. John the Baptist would say, "among you stands one whom you do not know" (*Jn.* 1:26). It often demands distance as well as humility to recognise the grace of God for it so often appears in the mundane and the ordinary.

Today, with the Magi who knelt before the poor child lying in the feeding trough of barn-animals, let us kneel with them before the great glory of God whose love saw Him desire to live with us so much that he willed that He Himself be born and live and suffer and die as we do.