



The Epiphany of the Lord January 2, 2011 A

EPIPHANY—THE MANIFESTATION OF JESUS TO THE GENTILE WORLD

In the 2008 edition of *Living Liturgy*, the editors wrote the following reflection on today's readings.

The Magi at this time of Jesus' birth were astrologers, seers. They were the ones who were used to looking for the meaning of events through signs. Consistent with their lifestyle, the Magi in the gospel observed a star-sign and followed its guidance, looking for the meaning it would reveal.

The Magi came to Jerusalem in good faith; they searched for a newborn king they did not yet know. They were open to going where the sign might lead. Their first response was to follow the sign. When they had found where the sign led them, then came their later, fuller response: they encountered ("saw the child"), "did him homage," and "opened their treasures and offered him gifts." Thus this feast is about revelation and response: revelation through the guidance of a star that the whole world may observe God's marvelous deeds; response of homage and opening oneself through the giving of gifts. The Magi's homage is a genuine response to God's revelation of salvation.

Further, Epiphany is a festival of manifestation. What is being manifested in this gospel? First of all, the gospel manifests God's revelation of the person of Christ, the dawning of salvation, and God's universal love as well as human response to God's overtures on behalf of humanity, which began with creation itself. Isaiah announces, "Your light has come" (first reading). Christ is that light. In Christ, God's light of salvation shines forth (is manifested) even on Gentiles (second reading). But what is also being manifested is the refusal of some people to see God's signs of revelation and respond faithfully. When the light of Christ shines in the world, the truth in human hearts stands starkly revealed—the Magi's sincerity and humble homage, and Herod's duplicity. The Magi followed the light and found the Savior of the world. No doubt the light of the only begotten Son they adored shone with the shining radiance spoken of in the first reading from Isaiah. The Magi came to Jerusalem and found the Light. Their response models how all nations can walk by this Light. Truly, this is a feast celebrating

the Light of universal salvation.

Application to our lives

The pattern of our own lives is that of the Magi: receive God's revelation, seek the Light, encounter the Savior, offer homage. An important lesson here for living is that authentic homage (that is, worship) naturally flows from following the Light of Christ in our daily living. Worship, then, is more than what happens in church on Sunday. It flows from the light of our own selves that shines throughout our weekdays, witnessing to our own encounters with the Light. Our very living must proclaim "the praises of the Lord" (first reading) by the good we do for others.

Receiving God's revelation and responding faithfully always demands of us this self-giving. Just as the Magi set out on a journey following the star, so is our own Christian journey about following the Light of Christ in all we do, even when it brings us to the cross. The real challenge of this feast is not simply about following the light of a star to "the newborn king of the Jews" (gospel). It is about where one's heart lies. As the light of Christ shines on us, we are invited to see what lies deep within our own hearts, to bring forth what is good, and to offer ourselves in worship.

A second reflection

As many of you know, some of the most popular commentaries on the New Testament are those written by the late Scottish biblical scholar, William Barclay, an Anglican Christian. In his commentary on Matthew's gospel, he shares with us some of the legends that developed around today's gospel. Barclay writes:

So the wise men found their way to Bethlehem. We need not think that the star literally moved like a guide across the sky. There is poetry here, and we must not turn lovely poetry into crude and lifeless prose. But over Bethlehem the star was shining. There is a lovely legend which tells how the star, its work of guidance completed, fell into the well at Bethlehem, and that it is still there and can still be seen sometimes by those whose hearts are pure.

Later legends have been busy with the wise men. In the early days, Eastern tradition said that there were twelve of them. But now the tradition that there were

three is almost universal. The New Testament does not say that there were three, but the idea that there were three no doubt arose from the threefold gift which they brought.

Later legend made them kings. And still later, legend gave them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Still later, legend assigned to each a personal description, and distinguished the gift which each of them gave to Jesus. Melchior was an old man, grey haired, and with a long beard, and it was he who brought the gift of gold. Caspar was young and beardless, and ruddy in countenance, and it was he who brought the gift of frankincense. Balthasar was swarthy, with the beard newly grown upon him, and it was he who brought the gift of myrrh.

From the early times, people have seen a peculiar fitness in the gifts the wise men brought. They have seen in each gift something which specially matched some characteristic of Jesus and his work.

Gold is the gift for a king. Seneca tells us that in Parthia it was the custom that no one could ever approach the king without a gift. And gold, the king of metals, is the gift fit for a king of people.

So then Jesus was "the Man born to be King." But he was to reign, not by force, but by love; and he was to rule over peoples' hearts, not from a throne, but from a Cross.

We do well to remember that Jesus Christ is King. We can never meet Jesus on an equality. We must always meet him on terms of complete submission. Nelson, the great admiral, always treated his vanquished opponents with the greatest kindness and courtesy. After one of his naval victories, the defeated admiral was brought aboard Nelson's flagship and on to Nelson's quarter-deck. Knowing Nelson's reputation for courtesy, and thinking to trade upon it, he advanced across the quarter-deck with hand outstretched as if he was advancing to shake hands with an equal. Nelson's hand remained by his side. "Your sword first," he said, "and then your hand." Before we must be friends with Christ, we must submit to Christ.

Frankincense is the gift for a priest. It was in the Temple worship and at the Temple sacrifices that the sweet perfume of frankincense was used. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for people. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, which means a bridge-builder. The priest is the man who builds a bridge between people and God. That is what Jesus did. He opened the way to God; he made it possible for people to enter into the very presence of God.

Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead.

Jesus came into the world to die. Holman Hunt has a famous picture of Jesus. It shows Jesus at the door of the

carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He is still only a boy and has come to the door to stretch his limbs which had grown cramped over the bench. He stands there in the doorway with arms outstretched, and behind him, on the wall, the setting sun throws his shadow, and it is the shadow of a cross. In the background there stands Mary, and as she sees that shadow there is the fear of coming tragedy in her eyes. Jesus came into the world to live for people, and in the end, to die for them. He came to give people his life and his death.

Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one who was to die—these were the gifts of the wise men and, even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme Savior of people.

Reflection

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the captives,
To rebuild nations,
To bring peace among peoples,
To make music in the heart.

—Howard Thurman

Have a blessed week,

Le Baron