



## THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD B

January 3, 2021

- ◆ **What the Magi can teach us about life's journey**
- ◆ **A love impossible to conceal**

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany (which means *manifestation*). Jesus manifests himself to the non-Jewish world symbolized by the Magi.

In the early church, the *star* symbolized faith. Just as the star guided and led the Magi to Jesus, so does the light of faith lead us to God in our faith journey.

The Magi also symbolize all those who are searching for something in the journey of life. At different times we search for different things.

In times of *suffering*, we search for strength, meaning and endurance. In times of *confusion*, we search for enlightenment. In times of *loneliness*, we search for intimacy and connection to others. Some of us search for God or for a deeper relationship with God. We may be searching for our niche in life.

As searchers on the journey of life, we could benefit from some of the gifts or characteristics we see operative in the lives of the Magi.

*The Attitude of Perseverance:* The journey of the Magi was a very long one. Along the way, they may have temporarily gotten lost and wondered if they would ever reach their destination. So it may be with us. As with the Magi, our journey may be a long one, and we may wonder sometimes if we are on the right track. We keep on truckin' with the hope that someday we will find what it is that we are seeking.

*Willingness to receive direction from others.* Along the way, the Magi sought the help of others, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews?" In the journey of life, many people walking with us have lots of wisdom that they could share with us and, thereby, enrich our lives. "Know-it-alls" are types of people who are usually very *unwise* people.

*Openness to finding what one is looking for in unexpected places.* It would have been easy for the Magi to believe that the newborn King was born in the local palace, but it must certainly have challenged their faith to believe that he was actually born in a stable. If

we are seeking companionship, are we set on finding it only in certain places or are we open to finding it in unexpected places with people we might never choose? *Listening to our dreams.* If the Magi were not people who listened to their dreams—to their deepest selves, they would not have gotten the message *not* to return to Herod. God speaks in the silence of our hearts and through the events of everyday life. We need to have a well-trained inner ear to hear our inner voice.

### **Who were the "Wise Guys" and what do they symbolize for us?**

In one of his commentaries on the Sunday Gospels, Anthony Marinelli asks and answers six questions about today's well-known Gospel story.

#### *Who were the Magi?*

According to the Scripture scholar, the late Fr. Raymond E. Brown, the existence of the Magi (from Matthew's Greek *magio*) can be traced back to the sixth century B.C.E. (before the common era), when they formed a priestly class between the Medes and later the Persian Zoroastrians. The book of Daniel describes them as flourishing in every corner of Babylonia. They were thought to have the power of interpreting visionary messages and dreams. At the time of Christ, the term Magi referred to any number of various people who could tell fortunes, interpret dreams, read the stars and perform magic. In Matthew's description, they are following a star that leads to the conclusion that they were astrologers.

#### *How many Magi were there and what were their names?*

The story in Matthew does not say how many. Traditionally, the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh have led to the conclusion that there were three Magi. Likewise, Matthew does not give them names. An eighth century tradition has called them Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar. Other legends tell us of their future sanctity and holy deaths after the celebration of one Eucharist in 54 C.E. (the common era). However, these are clearly legends.

#### *Is this story historical? Did the events happen as described?*

Answering this question is very difficult because there may be elements of historical truth in the story. However, Scripture scholars seem to concur that the weight of evidence goes against a historical interpretation of events. To begin, the idea of a star resting over a single house is implausible. Nor is there any mention of any of these events outside Matthew's Gospel (neither in the history of the time nor in Luke's version of the events). It is hard to imagine how such extraordinary occurrences could be unnoticed by the people of the time.

### ***Where did the story originate?***

Although scholars differ in their assessments, many believe that the story of the Magi is a faith-filled reflection on passages from the Old Testament, most notably Numbers 24:17: "I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob and a staff shall rise from Israel." Matthew, more than any of the other evangelists, is intent on showing the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Throughout the infancy narrative, Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Thus, it is not unlikely that he continued this motif or theme in the telling of the story of the Magi.

### ***What is the point of the story in Matthew's Gospel?***

Matthew's infancy narrative seeks to do more than tell the story of Jesus' birth. In it, we find the entire Gospel in miniature. In this story, the obvious contrast is between the Magi and Herod. The Magi represent the Gentiles, those outside Judaism, who will come to accept Jesus as Lord. Herod represents the Jewish leaders who reject Jesus. The situation reflects not only Jesus' future rejection by the chief priests but Matthew's life experience. It is the Gentiles and not the Jews who have accepted Jesus.

### ***What is the importance of this feast?***

The word "Epiphany" means manifestation and it refers to the manifestation of the Lord and savior to all people. Christianity is "Catholic" in the most basic meaning of the word. It is universal, intended for all. The Early Church struggled mightily with the question of whether converts must take on Jewish law as well as belief in Jesus. In answering the question negatively, the community was allowing the prophecy of Isaiah to come true: "Nations shall walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance." Christians believe that in Christ all persons have been saved, that God has offered himself to all humanity. The Magi are the symbols of this reality in the story. From the beginning of his life, the story tells us, the Messiah was a light to all nations, a savior for all people.

The following reflection on the feast of the Epiphany was written by Robert Morneau, retired auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Greenbay. This is a very beautiful meditation. Read it *slowly*.

The feast of the Epiphany is all about God's light, love and life. It is in Jesus, the light of the world, that we are empowered to see with the eyes of faith. It is in Jesus, the beloved of the Father, that the extravagance of divine love is made manifest. And it is in Jesus, through whom all life and holiness comes, that we are invited to participate in the life of grace.

**Light:** The Magi experienced the darkness of human existence. They were on a journey, not knowing exactly where they were going or what they were seeking. But a star guided them; a light in the darkness filled their souls with hope. They ventured on and eventually were given a revelation, a manifestation, an epiphany. In the Christ Child, the Magi came to new knowledge and wisdom.

In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, one of the characters, Portia by name, is walking in the dead of night with her servant girl. Off in the distance a small candle is burning in Portia's window and she comments to her maid:

*"That light we see is burning in my hall.  
How far that little candle throws his beams!  
So shines a good deed in a naughty world."*

Our world is very naughty with its wars, incivility, and hatred. Jesus came to bring us light and knowledge so that we might see what really matters.

**Love:** Herod attempted to deceive the Magi. Instead of love, hatred filled his heart and Herod would kill anyone who threatened his power. Little did he know that in Jesus the love of God was being made visible. Through the mystery of the Incarnation and Nativity, love broke into our world in a whole new way. This is the love that conquers hatred and fear.

St. Paul tells us that God's love is not limited to one particular people. Divine love is universal and inclusive. All are heirs of God's promise of salvation. In Jesus that salvation and love is revealed in history. As the poet Anne Sexton says:

*"Love and a cough cannot be concealed.  
Even a small cough. Even a small love."*

God's love is not small and it is impossible to conceal it.

**Life:** A third Epiphany word: life! The Magi knelt before new life, the infant Jesus. Although death was in the air through the presence of Herod, life was stronger

than death. This child would one day give his life in a supreme sacrifice but that is not the end of the story. Life in Jesus means resurrection. The sting of death has been removed and we are bound for glory, the glory of the risen life.

The opening prayer on this Feast of the Epiphany captures well the three epiphany words that shape our Christian life. We pray as a Church:

*“Father of light, unchanging God,  
today you reveal to people of faith  
the resplendent fact of the Word made flesh.  
Your light is strong, your love is near;  
draw us beyond the limits, which this world imposes,  
to the life where your Spirit makes all life complete.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.”*

Jay Cormier writes the following reflection.

### **THE FACE OF GOD**

High in the Andes Mountains, on the banks of a deep pond, stood a little village. Many, many years before, opposite the pond, a villager had carved the face of their god, a face of extreme beauty, a face of greatness and serenity, a face of love and strength. The villagers believed that one day their god would come and live in their midst. Centuries passed, but their god did not appear. The villagers prayed to the god of stone, but it remained stone and statue, distant and dead.

Then, one day, a child was born in the village. Even as an infant, the beauty of the ancient face captivated him. He crawled to the brink of the abyss and looked and looked and looked. When he was old enough, he walked to the stone, spending hours looking at it. And as he studied the face, taking in all its beauty and greatness, the love and strength that poured from it filled his spirit, and his own face began to change.

Then one day, the villagers saw him passing along the village’s main road and saw that the expression they had so loved in the carving of their god was now on the face of the young man.

The miracle had happened; their god was in their midst.

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In the Epiphany event, God’s grace is made manifest in the person of Jesus; the distance between God and humanity disappears in the birth of the child; the remote God of the universe becomes real and approachable in the face and voice and touch of Jesus. In Christ, God is in our midst—and in Christ, we can become the presence of God for others. May all that we hold, may

all that we touch, may all that we are, realize the true miracle of the Incarnation—that we and our world are holy and sacred in the sight of God, our Father and Creator.

### **The rich diversity of our country reflects the rich diversity and universality of our Church.**

Each year, thousands of people from every race and background enter our country and become citizens—become our brothers and sisters. In a real sense, it is this embrace of all peoples that we celebrate on this feast day. In our second reading today, St. Paul says:

*“God’s secret plan was revealed to me. It is no less than this: in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are now coheirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the gospel.”*

The universality of the Church is the focus of the Feast of the Epiphany. The coming of the Magi to the Christ Child signifies the entrance of the Gentiles into the community of God’s chosen people. At first the word “universal” seems to make the Church remote and distant. But if we take a second look, we see that the universality of the Church touches our lives in close quarters and nearby.

In a negative way, it prevents us from becoming exclusive and possessive. Having been members of the Church for so long, we tend to consider it an elite society and as something belonging to us. We can become so familiar and comfortable with the Church that we resent any intrusion by new members who might upset the status quo. This is especially true if they speak a different language, have a different color and live by different customs.

We need to be reminded that all peoples—regardless of how much different they are from us—are called to be coheirs with us. Otherwise, we become selfish and insecure about those with whom we live, work and worship. Otherwise, we become narrow-minded and feel threatened by anyone who wants to belong to our group.

In a positive way, universality makes us humble and grateful. Once we remember that we, too, entered the Church at some time like the Magi—as strangers and foreigners—we can’t help but realize that our membership is a gift and that we are only guests.

So it shouldn’t matter whether we’re black or white, Polish or Irish, Cuban or Mexican, Filipino or Vietnamese—we are all members of the same body of Christ. It shouldn’t make any difference whether we’re rich or poor, educated or uneducated, old or young—we are all fellow travelers and sharers of the same promise.

Because we belong to a universal Church, we can risk reaching out to come to each other. Because we are called to the same faith, we can support one another as we follow a star and a dream in search of Christ.

A big challenge for us as citizens (or non-citizens) of this country is to learn to live with people of all kinds of backgrounds, beliefs and languages. As a church family, this is also a challenge. Every Sunday in church, we sit with people with a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and with people with very different political convictions. Also, we sit with people who may strongly embrace some beliefs of our Church and not embrace some others. But what we all have in common is that we are children of God and all are present around the same Table to listen to the Word of God and receive his Body and Blood.

### **Reflection questions**

1. Who or what has been a “star” in your life that has led you to see or know Jesus? How?
2. Was there a time in your life that you had to take a different route to achieve your goal?
3. Who or what are the Herod’s in your life that you have had to deal with? What helped you to deal with them?

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Sarah". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.