

January 8, 2023
The Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Matthew 2:1-12

“Behold, the Lord, the Mighty One has come; and kingship is in His grasp, and power and dominion.”

Today’s Entrance Antiphon beckons us to celebrate in the Eucharist and remember the Epiphany of the Lord. Now I know for many there might be some confusion as to what exactly the Epiphany is. You may remember the definition of an epiphany as being like a *Eureka* experience, or “a sudden, intuitive perception of - or insight into reality - usually initiated by some simple or commonplace occurrence or experience,” but here we are talking about something different.

In the West the Epiphany is a term associated with a Christian feast day that is observed on January 6, the last day of the twelve days of Christmastide commemorating the manifestation of the Christ to the gentiles as represented by the Magi coming to pay homage to the Christ child.

Theologically the term Epiphany means appearance, manifestation, or presentation. Hence the Epiphany celebrates the manifestation or revelation of Jesus’ Incarnational Kingship as well as He is being the Light of the World.

Technically speaking then, Christmas is not a single day; not at all, instead it is an unfolding religious season of celebration that actually starts at the beginning of Advent on up to December 25th

which then progresses into a twelve-day time of remembrance in which to enter more deeply into the mystery of the *Incarnation*.

To better grasp the true meaning of The Epiphany of the Lord mandates that we utilize the historical framework of the Early Church. When Church history is not taught, people automatically take on the definitions and opinions of modernity or postmodernity, and then who knows what may be presented.

Known today in many parts of the world as Little or Old Christmas, the Nativity or birth of Jesus was first celebrated in the Early Church on the eve of the 5th day of January. January 6th was reserved as a day set aside to commemorate the Theophany, or the vision, or the Epiphany of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, history supports the notion that the Epiphany celebration on January 6th predates any December 25th Christmas festivities – and if not January 5th then the 6th indeed may have initially been the actual date the early church celebrated the birth of Our Lord

When the Western Bishops of the Church adjusted the birth of Christ to be celebrated December 25th through January 6th – the combined twelve days after Christmas then became more associated with commemorating the visitation of the Magi, and the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and/or His first miracle at the Cana Wedding Feast.

Unfortunately, changing the date to December 25th a pagan winter solstice holiday has caused no little amount of consternation over the years for many quasi-Christian groups, not to mention the opposition of Eastern Christianity. Now that's not to say that there

were not some good reasons for introducing a birthdate change, but probably a discussion for another time.

Consequently, in concert with the older Julian calendar most Orthodox Churches continue to celebrate the Nativity and Epiphany on January 6th and/or on January 19th if they happened to be St Thomas Christians and follow the Julian calendar.

Needless to say, for the non-liturgical Christian it can be somewhat confusing as to what the historical Church is actually celebrating when it refers to the Octave of Christmas, or the Epiphany being the final day of the Twelve Days of Christmas. Therefore, we want to wish all of our brothers and sisters in the various Eastern Orthodox and Russian Old Believer Churches a very Merry Christmas and a Holy Epiphany observance.

And finally, for all of our Spanish-speaking friends - we want to celebrate with them *El Día De Reyes* a long held Spanish tradition of remembering The Three Kings that came to honor the Baby Jesus, by celebrating family dinners, good food, gifts, and the sharing of the traditional Kings' Cake, or *Rosa*, - *El pastel de Reyes*.

Now concerning the Gospel reading. Let's take a few moments to talk about the key historical components found in the text. Here we discover where Jesus was born. The Bible states that as a result of the census in the days of King Herod Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Last week we mentioned that Bethlehem in the context of the Hebrew language means "House of Bread."

Next, we have King Herod. The question then becomes, who was he? Well for starters we know that from a historical Jewish perspective King Herod was not considered to be a legitimate king,

in fact he was a puppet king set up by the Roman government. Secondly, he was not of the house of David - nor was he of the tribe of Judah so in reality he really had no legitimate historical right to be the king of Israel.

Hence his illegitimacy was one of the reasons he was so concerned with the announcement that a new King of Israel was to be born. In fact, Herod was so obsessed with maintaining his worldly position that he even had members of his own family killed so as to maintain his kingship. More on king Herod later.

Now let us turn to the topic of the Magi. The gospel reading gives little information concerning them. However, the church has come to terms that the Magi were indeed learned and wise men.

Secondly these men were most likely Gentiles. Tradition supports the notion they may have been pagan astrological priests who were descendants of Balaam the soothsayer mentioned in Numbers chapters 20-22 and influenced by the Jewish religion during Israel's captivity in Babylon. But for sure these Persian men were not Israelites, and even though they were not devout Jews as mentioned a moment ago they most likely were familiar with the Torah and Jewish Traditions. Needless to say, they were men who exercised a measure of astute spiritual intuition.

Quite possibly kings in their own countries the Magi possessed that God given inner spiritual compass given to every person that directed them to study the Hebrew Scriptures and look to the heavens for signs concerning Isaiah's prophecy in regard to the birth of Israel's new king.

Historical documents give no concrete number of Magi appearing before the Christ child, nor do they mention any particular names for the traveling astrologers, or ascribe any elaborate mystical hidden meaning to their gifts other than the fact that today's readings mentions three gifts consisting of gold, frankincense, and myrrh born on dromedaries from three different middle eastern regions, and subsequently the consensus by the 5th Century was that there were three Magi or three kings who visited Jesus.

Now before we go on there is one more key component in the story that ought to be discussed and that is the star. What about the star? How could a star direct the Magi and not be noticed by everyone else?

Philosophers, theologians, Bible students, scientists, and even some politicians have spent copious hours searching ancient literature and studying the Sacred Texts resulting in reams of speculation and theory trying to explain this mystery. Even King Herod himself took special interest in the matter when the Magi from the East asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage in Bethlehem of Judea according to the prophet Micha," (Micha 5:2).

The Bible states that after the Magi left Herod's court the star *once again* preceded them, and then stopped over the house where the child was. Needless to say, we have all probably heard numerous explanations concerning the star. Again, astronomers and scientists both have their theories; philosophers have their speculations, and unfortunately modern/postmodern Bible speculators and pseudo theologians often try to align themselves with their favorite estimations or whatever the most current idea

is. But one thing for sure, stars or burning suns as we know them do not turn off or flash on again and again; however, angels do appear and disappear at will.

So, what if we were to actually look to the Bible for an answer, what does it say? I think the answer to the star question might be found in rereading Revelation 1:20 where it states, “The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lamp stands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands which you saw are the seven churches.”

Hence, I think that it would be reasonable to hypothesize that the star the Magi saw may have been none other than an Angel of the Lord. In fact, the shepherds saw a great light and a heavenly host of angels. Lots of angels produce lots of light. Therefore, it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the star was actually a heavenly group of angelic beings that directed the Magi to the place where the Christ Child was born.

So, then we might also ask, how long did it take for the Magi to travel to Bethlehem from their countries of origin? The exact timing of their travels is unknown, (maybe it could have even been a couple of years) however one thing we do know is that by the time they arrived on the scene the Holy Family had already found a house to dwell in.

Why then would we say a couple of years? Well for starters King Herod had all the Jewish male children two years or younger murdered in an attempt to kill the newborn king. Needless to say, here one can only speculate as to when the star or angel first

appeared and the Magi's particular travel circumstances because at best camel caravans are capable of doing only about 18-25 miles per day on a good day.

So, then what are we to glean from this story? What is it that the Holy Spirit would want us to learn and practice? Well, that's a good question and the answers are often hidden in the wake of a busy and shortened Christmas season. We certainly need more than one day to contemplate all of these separate yet connected marvelous events. So, on that note lets delve a little deeper.

In today's reading all the parties had the same information. The Jewish prophets had proclaimed the birth of the Messiah King to anyone willing to read the Sacred Texts. According to tradition even some of the non-Jewish writings predicted the birth of a king.

One such example is the *Fourth Eclogue*, the name of a Latin poem by the Roman poet Virgil written around 40 BC and published a couple of years later. "The work describes the birth of a boy, a supposed savior, who once of age will become divine and eventually rule over the world."¹ If you want to speculate, you might conclude that Arius, the father of Arianism concluded Jesus became God when he became of age form a pagan roman poet.

So why is it then that only a few Magi saw the angel or star? How was it - if it was a real star as some proclaim it was - how was it that the whole world did not see the blazing light of a distant sun (because again, that's what stars are) and only a few shepherds and three wise men did? (Another point for the Angel star theory)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_interpretations_of_Virgil's_Eclogue_4

Needless to say, the Incarnation is definitely a mystery revealed only to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, but there are a few key points here that will help us to better understand this mystery.

Therefore, we will soon discover that the answers to these sacred mysteries are not in the particulars, i.e., the names and number of Magi, the timing of the trip or the particulars of the three Magi kings. No, the answers lie in the attitudinal dispositions of the noted five kings.

Five kings you say, I thought there were only three kings. Well, maybe the sub-title of this homily ought to be labeled the “Journey of the Five Kings.” Think about it, there were five kings whose lives were destined to converge long ago in a certain little city called Bethlehem.

Holy men of God foretold the meeting well in advance. One king was to be announced as the New-born God/man King of kings – He was destined to be born in the city of Bethlehem to set His people free.

Then there were the three Middle Eastern kings, who traveled to Bethlehem from the East. Collectively they represent all the Gentile peoples, and they came to humble themselves and pay homage to this newborn King of kings.

The fifth king was a false and worldly king. King Herod was all about himself. His main concern was self-interest. Willing to go to any length to maintain his prideful ego - even to the point of causing the death of thousands of Holy Innocents was no matter to him.

So, there we have it – the lives of five historical people – six if you include yourself- were destined to intersect at a given point in time, in a given place, and for a specific reason. Their collective stories pose the question, “How will I meet the King of kings? I can do one of two things, I can acknowledge Him as King, Lord and Redeemer, bow down and offer Him my life, gifts, and talents, or I can stand defiant and fight to demand and maintain my self-directed will. Here the choice is mine - as it also was theirs.

So then in closing - allow me to offer a key point critical for our ongoing spiritual formation. Priorities, it’s all about priorities. The quest to humble oneself before the Christ child and thus commune with the King of kings starts with a willingness to look up to the heavens.

You see - one cannot recognize the stars in the heavens while fixated on the common dust collectors of earth. The truth of the matter is, “only wise men and women still seek Him.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.