

Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Opening Prayer

Holy and generous God, in your great love you have revealed yourself in creation. But you have done even more – you have revealed yourself in your Son, our Lord Jesus. By believing in and following Him, we are led to eternal life with you. Help us not to be like King Herod, who, threatened by your revelation, tried to kill Jesus. Help us to be like the magi so that when we see your revelation, we will be filled with delight. We make our prayer in the name of Jesus the Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Epiphany means revelation or manifestation. Epiphany was originally an Eastern Church celebration. It was originally and primarily a celebration of baptism, the first Epiphany or manifestation. As the celebration moved westward, it took on the meaning of the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles. The central point of this celebration is that God's salvation is intended not only for the people of Israel, but for all people.

Epiphany is now celebrated as the 12th day of Christmas and its celebration seems to predate the celebration of Christmas itself. The Greek word "epiphany", meaning manifestation or appearance was used most often in ancient times to describe the king or ruler "showing himself" before the people of the nation. During epiphany we see how God epiphanies Himself through Jesus. It is the people of God empowered with the gifts of the Holy Spirit who reveal the risen Christ to the world through acts of creation, love, healing, and liberation. We of the Church are called to be an ever-unfolding epiphany of God's love and power to the dark world seeking desperately for such epiphanies.

The 12th night is a familiar title of a Shakespearian play and comes from European heritage where 12th night parish parties are (or were) celebrated. These parties have carried over into the Mardi Gras tradition. During the party, at the appointed time, the king cake is brought out. Hidden in the cake are three beans or coins. Those who find the "prizes" are crowned kings or queens for the evening. While the "royalty" are being outfitted for their office, the Christmas tree is stripped of all ornaments (German Lutherans call this "plundering the tree"). The tree is removed from the room and saved for the Lenten season when it is stripped of its branches and made into a processional cross.

Tradition also celebrates the arrival of the wise men at this time.

1st Reading - Isaiah 60:1-6

Today's Old Testament reading is one of Isaiah's "Songs of the First Return" which are a lyrical description of the new Jerusalem as Israel is gathered from different places and restored.

¹ Rise up in splendor! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.

An extraordinary illumination, as though God were, by His presence in the city, radiating a dazzling light [see Deuteronomy 33:2, Malachi 4:1 (3:19 in NAB & NJB) where fiery love (the fire of judgment and refining) is described]. Like a sunrise, darkness immediately surrenders to the brilliant light, there is neither dawn nor dusk. [Verses 1-3 have been seen by some commentators as the source of Revelation 12].

² See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; But upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory. ³ Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. ⁴ 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.

Literally, verse 4d reads "your daughters are carried on the hips of their nurses."

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

Those who are from Midian, Ephah, and Sheba are all descendants of Abraham (Genesis 25:1-4). God's chosen people who were scattered long ago now come to participate in their ancient inheritance promised by God's covenant with Abraham. One day all nations will become God's children (Romans 4:17; 8:16-17).

2nd Reading - Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Our second reading was written while Paul was in prison (verses 4:1; 6:20). "Prisoner" is a title of honor, a distinction that the preacher has gained for having borne witness to the truth. It is the mark of a true apostle (2 Corinthians 11:23; 6:4-5; Luke 21:12).

² [Y]ou have heard

A possible indication that some readers did not know Paul directly

of the stewardship

A ministry; not a task, but a realization of God's plan

of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit,

God's favor was shown to Paul not for himself but for others.

³ (namely, that) the mystery was made known to me by revelation. ⁵ [It] was not made known to human beings in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, ⁶ that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The Jews are God's chosen people, his family. The Gentiles are now part of this family which forms the new Israel and shares in the inheritance (Romans 8:16-17).

Gospel - Matthew 2:1-12

Today's Gospel reading has been called "The Worship of the Magi". Matthew and Luke both have accounts of the conception and birth of Jesus and some of the incidents that followed the birth. Neither Mark nor John address this period in Jesus' life. Matthew's version is greatly affected by the use of Old Testament texts. The magi seek a king, and Herod consults the religious experts of Judaism to find out where they should look. Of this there is no doubt, they should look not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem – the city of David.

¹ When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod,

Four different Herods are mentioned in the New Testament. The first is Herod the Great, referred to in this passage and the next; the second is his son, Herod Antipater, who had John the Baptist beheaded (Matthew 14:1-12) and who abused our Lord during His Passion (Luke 23:7-11); the third, Herod Agrippa I, a nephew of Herod the Great, who executed the apostle James the Greater (Acts 12:1-3), imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:4-7), and died suddenly and mysteriously (Acts 12:20-23). The fourth, Herod Agrippa II, was Herod Agrippa I's son – it was before him that Paul answered Jewish accusations when he was a prisoner in Caesarea (Acts 23:23). Herod the Great, who appears here, was the son of non-Jewish (Arab) parents. He came to power with the aid of and as a vassal of the Romans, particularly Marc Antony (see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.13.1'324-326). He was a consummate politician and among other things he rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem on a lavish scale. Herod the Great had a persecution complex; everywhere he saw rivals to his throne. He was notorious for his cruelty: he killed over half of his 10 wives, some of his children, and many people of standing. He died in 4 BC.

behold, magi

Wise men, astrologers. Originally the term designated the learned priestly caste of the Persians; later it came to mean anyone skilled in occult knowledge and power (magicians), or a charlatan or trickster. The word is not used in an abusive or derogatory sense here by Matthew and the mention of the star shows that they are wise men who study the stars (astrologers). Nothing else is said about them. Since they are not Jews, they can be considered to be the very first gentiles to receive the call to salvation in Christ.

from the east arrived in Jerusalem,

This suggests Mesopotamia, the home of astrology in the Greek (Hellenistic) world.

² saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews?”

The Jews had made known throughout the East their hope of a Messiah. The wise men knew of this expected Messiah, king of the Jews. According to ideas widely accepted at the time, this sort of person, because of his significance in world history, would have a star connected with his birth (Numbers 24:17-19, which many of the Church fathers have interpreted as messianic prophecy, but it is not quoted in the New Testament).

We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

When the leader gets stirred up, the populace gets agitated too; especially with the reputation which Herod had. In all Jewish circles at the time of Jesus, the hope was widespread that the Messiah would come soon. The general idea was that he would be a king, like a new and even greater David. Herod’s worry is therefore all the more understandable: he governed the Jews with the aid of the Romans and cruelly and jealously guarded his crown. Due to his political ambition and lack of a religious sense, Herod saw a potential messiah-king as a dangerous rival to his own worldly power.

⁴ Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people,

In the time of Jesus, both Herod’s monarchy and the occupying Romans recognized the Sanhedrin as the representative body of the Jewish people. The Sanhedrin was, therefore, the nation’s supreme council which ruled on day-to-day affairs, both religious and civil. Following Exodus 24:1-9 and Numbers 11:16, the Sanhedrin was composed of 70 members presided over by the high priest. The members were elected from three groupings:

- 1) The chief priests, that is, the leaders of the principal priestly families; it was these families who appointed the high priest (the chief priests also included anybody who had formerly held the high priesthood).
- 2) The elders, or leaders of the most important families.
- 3) The scribes, who were teachers of the Law or experts in legal and religious matters – the majority of these scribes were Pharisees.

In this passage, only the 1st and 3rd groups are mentioned. This is understandable since

the elders would have no authority in the matter of the birth of the Messiah – a purely religious question.

he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: ⁶ ‘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.’”

Quotes Micah 5:2 (Micah 5:1 in NAB & NJB). It is worth noting that Jewish tradition interpreted this prophecy as predicting the Messiah’s exact place of birth and as referring to a particular person. The prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. The text quoted here is not a direct quotation from either the Hebrew or Greek texts but is colored by 2 Samuel 5:2, the offer of kingship to David made by the elders of Israel.

⁷ Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance.

Looks forward to verses 13-23 when the male children born around this time will be slain

⁸ 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.”

Not to adore Him, but to dispose of Him. Such was Herod’s exclusively political view of things.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They were overjoyed at seeing the star, ¹¹ 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.

The prophets and the psalmists foretold that the kings of the earth would pay homage to God at the time of the Messiah (Isaiah 49:23). They would offer him their treasures (Isaiah 60:5-6) and adore Him (Psalm 72:10-15). Through the action of these wise men, these prophecies begin to be fulfilled; although there is no indication that these wise men were kings or emissaries of kings. The gifts offered were those most valued in the East and have symbolic meanings:

- Gold - A symbol of royalty and Jesus’ kingship
- Frankincense - A symbol of Jesus’ divine priesthood
- Myrrh - A burial spice and symbol of Jesus’ death to redeem us.

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

The involvement of the wise men ends with an act of obedience and cooperation with God's plan.

Notice that throughout this story, nowhere is it stated how many magi there were. In later Christian tradition they became known as kings (in fulfillment of the prophecy) and their number was settled at three; deduced from the number of gifts. Eventually, they were named Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior in the Western Church, and Caspar became a black. They were understood as representatives of the Gentile world in all its racial diversity who come to Christ.

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>