



EPIPHANY OF THE LORD, CYCLE B

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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." Matt 2:6

Today on the solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, we switch from Luke's infancy narrative to Matthew's gospel for the story of the Magi. In Luke, Jesus is recognized and adored first by Jewish shepherds. But Matthew gives this role to Gentile wise men. On the surface, it appears that the Jews remain indifferent, yet even so are reminded of the ancient prophecy that this Child King will be *"shepherd to my people Israel."* This point alone can serve to remind us that the infancy narratives in both gospels are a poetic summary of the whole gospel, with the message that the universal sacred heart of Jesus will be poured out to comfort all humankind. As we heard from the Gospel of John on Christmas morning, God's predestined plan was that Jesus *"came to his own, but his own did not accept him" (1:11).*

It is not clear exactly who the Magi were. One scholar says that they were a caste of wise men, associated with astrology, magic and the interpretation of dreams. Later tradition set their number at three and named them Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, and cast Caspar as a black man. Though none of this has much basis in scripture or in historical fact, it is a Truth that is generally in accord with their role in the telling of the folk legend as representatives of the whole Gentile world.

What is clear is that for Matthew, they represent the Gentile nations of the world who recognize Christ as their king. This was not a simple visual recognition. These three mystics were blessed by the Holy Spirit to experience a mystical encounter with the Christ child. Isaiah called them kings, but these three kings saw the world through the eyes of compassion not greed, *"Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance."* Isaiah 60:3.

This passage is written as a marvelous story of journey, intrigue, discovery, danger and escape. To capture it poignantly, the Holy Spirit called for the inspired literary skills of the evangelist, Matthew. Like children who want to hear their favorite stories over and over, every year the Church welcomes a good telling of this ancient tale. Using what Saint Ignatius of Loyola called *"Holy Imagination,"* place yourself in the drama of the story, and be drawn deep into the mystery of this annual feast day of the Epiphany of the Lord.

In reflection this week, perhaps we, too can feel what the wise men felt, the fulfillment of all human desire. May we, in turn, offer in life our gold, as a symbol of humanity; the burning of frankincense, with its smoke rising symbolic of Christ's divinity, and myrrh, a symbol of the sorrow pondered by His mother, Mary, in acknowledgement of Christ's redemptive suffering to come. But through it all, may we experience the joy of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth, in this holy moment.

*"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage."*

A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
in the days of King Herod,
behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,
“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage.”
When King Herod heard this,
he was greatly troubled,
and all Jerusalem with him.
Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people,
He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.
They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea,
for thus it has been written through the prophet:
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.”
Then Herod called the magi secretly
and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance.
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.”
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.
They were overjoyed at seeing the star,
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.
And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they departed for their country by another way.

The Gospel of the Lord

