

Today we mark the Epiphany, which tells the story of the Magi – the wise men, or three kings, as they sometimes are called – who travelled a great distance to worship the newborn Christ child.

It has been suggested that if instead of wise men it had been wise women making the journey, the outcome would have been quite different. First, wise women would have stopped much sooner in their travels to ask for directions. Second, unlike the wise men who arrived well after Jesus was born, wise women would have reached the Bethlehem stable on time to help deliver the baby. Third, instead of gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, wise women would have brought practical gifts that a baby could use. Fourth, wise women would have made a casserole to tide the Holy family over while they adjusted to caring for a new baby. And finally, instead of just talking about peace on earth, the wise women would have ensured that it happened.

The word ‘Epiphany’ means ‘manifestation.’ Think of the Epiphany as an unveiling of sorts, when something that was long hidden is finally and thoroughly revealed. At Epiphany, it is God’s divine glory in the person of Jesus that is revealed to all the world. As a result, the world finally gets to find out what God is like. That is why the symbol for the season of Epiphany is light. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (9:2). Hopefully our own experience of Epiphany is that each of us sees a little more clearly how and why God is important in our lives.

The story of the Magi is well known. They were priests with a special knowledge of dreams and astrology who took a cross-country journey following a star to an unknown destination, which you must admit sounds like a rather fanciful thing to do. There have been many attempts over the centuries to identify the unusual star the Magi followed. One interesting, but ultimately irrelevant theory, is that what they were witnessing in the night sky was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn.

Matthew’s account of Christ’s birth which we are looking at today provides a very different picture from that of Luke which we read during worship on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Luke’s version of the Nativity is all good news, full of pleasant scenes. Matthew’s version, by contrast, where we read of kings and royal courts and there is not a humble shepherd anywhere in sight, is full of challenge and tension.

When King Herod hears the Magi’s story about searching for the newborn King of the Jews, Herod, who was ever alert to any potential threat to his own authority, instructs the Magi to let him know where they locate the child so that he too can worship it. Which, of course, was a lie. Herod was one of history’s most notorious villains. He murdered many of his closest friends and advisers, along with his wife and three of his sons – anyone he suspected might become a rival for his power. It was said of Herod at the time that it was better to be his sow than his son, because the pig in the royal barnyard had a better chance of survival.

We know how the story turns out. The Magi find Jesus at Bethlehem, they worship him, they offer him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they are warned in a dream not to reveal Jesus’ whereabouts to Herod, and they return to their home country by another route.

Although the two gospel accounts by Luke and Matthew of the birth of Jesus are different, their message is consistent. They make clear that the Messiah born at Bethlehem will not be like any other king the world has ever known and will not be found in the places where one might expect to find a king. From the very beginning of Jesus’ life, expectations of how God acts in this world, and how God relates to people, are being challenged and overturned.

What might we take away from our own return visit to Epiphany this year, at the end of what has been for so many people throughout the world a difficult year, and just two days into the beginning of 2022? I have four suggestions.

First, in a sense Matthew's gospel account is not about three Magi or wise men or kings journeying from afar. It is about two kings – King Herod and Jesus, the infant king. Herod presented the wise men with a choice: they could make the safe choice and stay in the good graces of a powerful and ruthless politician by following Herod's instructions and telling him where they found the Christ child. Or they could take a risk by defying Herod and following instead the path that God placed before them, and in so doing encounter God, in the person of Jesus.

Have we not also been presented with similar if less extreme choices in our lives? Have we not been faced time and time again with the easier choice of following the Herods of the world, by which I mean anything in life that pushes Christ aside and claims our allegiance instead of our being faithful to God? For example, could selfishness about how we use our personal resources, or a lack of interest in learning more about God, could they be considered our Herods? Could indifference towards those who are in need or experiencing pain, or an unwillingness to get involved correcting an injustice whether small or large, could those things be considered Herods that claim our allegiance and draw us away from God? What about holding a grudge, or not accepting our share of blame for a disagreement? Can those actions, like a Herod, obstruct our relationship with God? The list of potential Herods we encounter throughout our life is seemingly endless. Do we, like the Magi, defy them? Or do we take the sometimes safe and easy path, and fail to choose faithfulness in God's plan for us?

Second, let's think about those odd gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Magi are said to have given Jesus. The story is told of an old teacher who visited a former student of his whose first child had recently been born. He presented the parents with a gift for the baby. It was a book, wrapped in fine paper and tied with a bow. Imagine the parents' surprise and bewilderment when, upon unwrapping the gift, they found that it was a very old leather-bound collection of Shakespeare's plays. They thought, "What a strange gift for a baby!" An old book, written in archaic language, given to a newborn who will not be able to read it for many years to come. And then they realized the gift was not the book; the gift was the giver. The old teacher's gift was a piece of himself. He had given the child something precious to himself – his own love of language embodied in Shakespeare. His gift was an expression of his deepest joy at the birth of the child, his hope for the future of this new human being. Maybe at points in your life you have given, or received, similar gifts of deep and loving symbolism.

Epiphany is a good time to think about the type of gifts that we present during our earthly pilgrimage to encounter God. The gifts we give might not be material things like the Magi's gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Our gifts can be the Epiphany light that we pray shines through us as we give to others our time, and our care, and our understanding. Would you agree that our best gift is offering God and others our souls and bodies in thanksgiving for the life that we have been given?

On the topic of gifts, as Christians we frequently stress that we ought to be givers. We know that "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Yet Epiphany is a time to remember that Christians ought to be good receivers as well. If it is blessed to give, it is also blessed to be open-minded about receiving. Think of it this way: none of us were born Christian. All that we have of our faith has been that which was received as a gift. Before we had faith in God, someone had to tell us about faith, had to live faith in God before we could do the same. Someone had to give us the gift of faith. But that was only half the bargain because we also had to receive the faith. We had to be open-minded and receptive to what God might have to say to us. We must be free to be receivers of faith as much as givers. And that never changes. Just because we accepted faith in God yesterday does not diminish the necessity of accepting the gift of faith in God today, and every day thereafter.

Third, try thinking of your own life's journey as an extension of the Magi's Epiphany journey. Think about how their search, their struggles, their uncertainties, their need to overcome adversity to encounter the perfect peace that the Christ child represented, is reflected in your own life. Like the Magi, we have looked if not to the stars than to a thousand other places searching for hope and love and meaning in life. Like the Magi, we know something about wanting to find someone who can be trusted to guide us on our life's journey. Like the Magi, we know about the dark places and the ruthlessness that can take hold of people when they are threatened or afraid. Like the Magi, we know about the curiosity, and courage, and conviction

that is required of anyone who is serious about discovering and following Christ in their life. The Magi are our reminder of the great goodness that results from persevering in our faithfulness to God.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, God led the wise men by using what was for them, an ordinary object – a star. Remember, they were astrologers. This Epiphany, do we, like the wise men, have the humility to lay aside all that we think we know, and to ask God to open our eyes in order that we might see more clearly God's truth for us? Let us resolve at the beginning of this new year to accept that God might use something completely ordinary to us, whatever that talent or gift might be, to reveal to us a new path that takes us even closer to God. **Amen.**

**Epiphany of the Lord**

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