

## The Epiphany of the Lord

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 60:1-6
<i>Response</i>	Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 3:2-3A, 5-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 2:1–12

Every year on the Second Sunday after Christmas, the Church celebrates the great feast of Epiphany. And on this feast the readings are the same; whether it's year A, B, or C, we are going to look at the same readings every single year. This is of course the great day where we celebrate the mystery of the revelation, or the unveiling, of Christ's kingship and his divinity. That is what Epiphany means, it is a kind of revelation or unveiling (or appearing is actually probably a better translation). And in this case, it's the appearing of Christ the King, Christ the divine Son of God. This time what we are going to do is we are going to look at the Gospel. This year, as always, it's taken from the Gospel of Matthew and the account of the Magi, which is arguably for many people, the most iconic mystery associated with the Christmas season. The image of the Magi coming to the stable — Christ is in a manger — and bringing him the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Everyone knows about the Magi, but who are they? Why are they there? How do they know about the mystery of who Jesus was in the coming of the King? What is the significance of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh? Those are all questions that a lot of times we have not necessarily explored in any depth. So that is what we are going to do today as we look at the great mystery of the Feast of Epiphany. So the Gospel for today begins in Matthew 2:1-12 and this is what it says:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying,

"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: `And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.<sup>1</sup>

There is so much we could talk about this passage that we could make a two hour video just on this particular passage, but we have to confine ourselves to making a few brief points here on the basis of some key elements in the text. Let's just walk through them together. First, notice the promise of Herod the King. Just a quick bit of background. Who was Herod? Herod was a puppet king who had been set up by the Romans. Remember that at this point Judea is under Roman occupation — they are under Roman Imperial rule — but the Romans would sometimes set up kings and leaders within the territories that they had occupied who knew the people and who could keep them in line. Herod was just such a king, but he wasn't a

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

legitimate king because he wasn't descended from the tribe of Judah, who the books of the Old Testament had said the king would come from.

In fact, he wasn't even fully Jewish. He was an Idumean, which meant he was a descendent of the Edomites who went back to Esau. So he was kind of seen as a half Jew. And in that sense you can see why he's not all that excited about the star appearing and the word that there's a new king on the horizon because he was a king who was very paranoid about losing his power because he wasn't an authentic and legitimate king. You can actually see this in the fact that we know from Josephus and other writers that Herod was an extremely wicked man. When he felt his throne was threatened he not only murdered his own wife, but he murdered several of his own children in order to keep them from taking his throne. So with that in mind you can see already the scene is set here for this fake king, this half Jewish king, who tries to act like he's the true Messiah, act like he's the true King, being threatened by the authentic King finally being born into the world. So that is the first thing, this drama of the tension between Herod and then the child king.

The second thing that is interesting to highlight is the wise men. Who were these wise men? Well if you look at the original Greek New Testament, the term used here for wise men is Magi. We get the word magician from this ancient Greek word Magi. It literally means a wise man, it is a term that was used to refer to great philosophers, astronomers, and astrologers, who were often members of royal courts who would act as advisors to the king, who were known for their wisdom and their learning and their knowledge, as well as their ability to read the signs of the heavens, to read the signs in the stars in the sky. And so these wise men come from the East — we don't know exactly where — to Jerusalem because they have seen a star in the sky that they recognize as a portent, as a sign of the birth of the King of the Jews, the birth of the Judean king. Now I don't have time to get into this in a lot of depth — Pope Benedict actually talks about this in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* — but in the first century A.D. there was not just an expectation among the Jews that the Messiah was going to come sometime in the first century — I talk about that also in my book *The Case for Jesus*. Pope Benedict points out that there was also an expectation amongst gentiles. We have ancient pagan writers like Suetonius, who was a Roman historian, as well as a couple other ancient writers — like Tacitus — who point out that amongst the pagans there was a rumor that a king would come out of Judea, that a great ruler would arise from within this tiny

people of the land of Judah. So even pagans were waiting for a Jewish king to come.

And that seems to have influenced these wise men of the east, although we don't know exactly who they were. So they come when they see the star. They go to Herod as king over Jerusalem and Herod — notice again — isn't ecstatic that this King's been born, it says “he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” So you can already see the opposition that Christ is going to face as the true king. So in order to check out the the biblical evidence for this he asks the scribes, “where do the scribes say that the King is going to be born,” and they quote this one text, it's from Micah 5 and it is a very important prophecy. They say “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet.” This prophet here is the prophet Micah. In Micah 5:2, the prophet says “there is going to come a future King of Israel, a future ruler, and he's going to come from the city of Bethlehem.” Which by the way, where I grew up everyone says Bethle**HAM**. I don't know why, but trust me there is no **ham** in Bethle**hem** because it was a Jewish city. Sorry, I couldn't help myself. It is Bethlehem. And Bethlehem was of course the famous city of David. The reason Bethlehem was so important is if you go back to 1 Samuel 16 you will see that this was the city of David. The story in 1 Samuel 16 tells us that Jesse lived in the city of Bethlehem and that it was his seven sons from which was chosen the anointed one, the Messiah, who would be of course King David.

So what the scribes then are showing to King Herod is that the Scriptures actually say where the king is going to born. He is going to be born in the city of Bethlehem. I'm just realizing as I'm saying that that I skipped over a second prophecy. So the explicit prophecy that is quoted in Matthew 2 is Micah 5. There is another prophecy from the Old Testament that lies behind this reading. It's actually a prophecy from the book of Numbers 24. So although this isn't a reading for the day I would actually like to just look at it quickly because it is the key to the significance of the star. If you go back to the book of Numbers 24:15-17, it's a famous oracle of the prophet Balaam. He was actually a pagan prophet, he is not a Jewish prophet or an Israelite or a Hebrew. In the book of Numbers he's a pagan who speaks the word of the Lord and he actually says this in chapter 24:15

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Be’or,  
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,

In verse 17 it says this:

I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not nigh:  
a star shall come forth out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;  
it shall crush the forehead of Moab,  
and break down all the sons of Sheth.  
Edom shall be dispossessed,

That's called the prophecy of the star. It is a very famous prophecy from book of Numbers. It was so famous in fact that in the second century A.D. when a Jewish man rose up and proclaimed himself the Messiah he called himself bar Kokhba, son of the star, in order to try to show that he was the Messiah. A number of scholars have suggested that this prophecy of the star may in fact have been known, not just by Jews, but by pagan wise men like the Magi, and they would recognize that when the star rose out of Jacob, that the scepter — the symbol of the King — would also rise in Israel. And so when they see that star in the heavens, they come to the land of Jerusalem in order to inquire about where exactly the King is going to be born. Now with that said, the question I always get from my students and many other people is “Dr. Pitre, what was the star? What is it? Is it some kind of comet? Is it a planet? What's going on here?” And the answer is we just don't know. There have always been competing opinions about the exact nature of the phenomena being described in the Gospel of Matthew with the star that the Magi see.

One thing I would like to say to you just as something to ponder is that many of the ancient Church Fathers actually didn't think of this as purely an astral phenomenon. They actually believe that the star was a supernatural phenomenon, that the star was an angel, because if you look at the Bible, very frequently stars are depicted as angels and angels are depicted as stars. And so the fact that this star rises in the heaven and then leads the Magi to the very house where Mary and Joseph and the

child are, suggests that it is not just a purely natural phenomena. If you go outside sometime and try to follow a star to a particular house, you'll never make it there. It doesn't work that way. So some of the ancient Church Fathers said that the star was actually a visible sign, but it was an angel, it was a supernatural phenomenon.

In any case, whatever it is, it's the combination of these two signs. And think about this for a second — the star in the heavens, which is kind of like the book of creation — so the Magi are reading the book of creation and it gives them some guidance, but then the other is the city of Bethlehem which they read about in the book of the Scriptures. So these two books, the book of creation and the book of the Scriptures, need to be read together in order for the Magi to find the Christ child, in order for them to find the one who has been born the King of the Jews. So the book of nature gets them so far, it gets them to Jerusalem, but they need the Scriptures to finally locate the true Messiah, to locate the King. Now when they get there what happens? They go into the house with the child, they find Mary his mother, and they fall down and they worship him. Now this is extremely important because the word used here for worship, *proskyneō*, literally means to bow down prostrate before someone. It actually means to get down like a dog before another person. So you bow down before them prostrate.

And in some contexts the word *proskyneō* can be used for the kind of homage that you pay to just an ordinary king, but in the Gospel of Matthew he uses this term for the kind of expression of adoration and veneration that you give to God and God alone. So for example, just a couple chapters later in Matthew 4:9, the devil says to Jesus that if he just “bows down and worships him, he will give him all the kingdoms of the world.” And Jesus responds by saying “No. God alone shall you worship.” And yet we see the Magi in chapter 2 here worshipping Jesus the Christ child. So what is the implication? The implication is that they recognize that he's not just the king of the Jews, they are not just venerating him as King, they are worshipping him as divine, as the divine king. Which by the way, on the level of history would not be a big deal in paganism because pagans had ideas of divine kings. In fact, at this very time in the first century, certain of the emperors of Rome are already being worshiped as the divine Caesar, which is in a sense a preparation for the true divine king who is going to come in the flesh in the person of Jesus the Christ child.

One last point. The most memorable aspect of the Magi story is their gifts. They opened their treasures and they give him these gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. So the question is why? What is the significance of the gold, the frankincense and myrrh? Well if you were a first century Jew you would recognize this immediately because the very gifts themselves are allusions to two Old Testament texts: Isaiah 60, which is a prophecy of the new Jerusalem, and Psalm 72, which was read by the Jews as a prophecy of the future King, of the Messiah. And guess what the Old Testament reading and the Psalm are for this day? The first reading is Isaiah 60 and then the responsorial psalm is from Psalm 72. So let's go back to those and look at what they have to say and we'll see how they point forward to the mystery of Epiphany. So in Isaiah 60:1-6 we have a prophecy of the New Jerusalem, and this is the first reading for the feast of Epiphany, this is what we read. Here the prophet is addressing the city of Jerusalem as if it's a person. So in the book of Isaiah there was this expectation that one day Jerusalem would be made new, it would be a new Jerusalem, and this new Jerusalem is so glorious and so beautiful that she is described as a woman, as a bride, as the bride of God. I go through this in my book *Jesus the Bridegroom*. This is just one of the prophecies of the new Jerusalem and so here is what it says:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
[meaning the light of the new Jerusalem]  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.  
And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising.  
[again this is speaking to the mother Jerusalem here]  
Lift up your eyes round about, and see;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far,  
and your daughters shall be carried in the arms.  
Then you shall see and be radiant,  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice;  
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,

the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Mid'ian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.

And here is the key line:

They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

What is that all about? What this is describing is the ancient Jewish hope that one day the Gentiles will convert. One day the pagan nations of the world will convert. The Hebrew word for nations here is *goyim*. Jewish people today will still use the word *goy* to refer to a non-Jewish person, a Gentile. So what Isaiah is saying is one day the the nations, the *goyim*, the Gentiles, are going to pilgrimage to the new Jerusalem. Just like the Jews pilgrimaged to Jerusalem in the first century, one day the Gentiles are going to pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They are going to take Jerusalem as their mother city. We get the word metropolis from mater (mother) and polis (city). So metropolis means mother city. So one day the Gentiles are going to say Jerusalem is our mother. She is our mother city and they are going to pilgrimage to Jerusalem and like all members of the kingdom they are going to bring tribute, they're going to bring gifts to the capital city. And what gifts will they bring? They are going to bring gold and they are going to bring frankincense to the new Jerusalem. And that's going to be a sign that they have converted to the truth of the God of Israel, of worshiping the God of Israel. So this Old Testament prophecy of the new Jerusalem is being fulfilled in the mystery of Epiphany.

But notice what is interesting. The magi bring gold and frankincense, but they don't bring it to the earthly city of Jerusalem. They go to Jerusalem but that's not where they bring their gifts. Who do they bring their gifts to? They bring their gifts to the Christ child and bring their gifts to Mary his mother, this is who Matthew mentions here. And I can't help but wonder, not only can I not help but wonder, but the Early Church Fathers are going to see in this a sign that Mary herself is like the new Jerusalem in person. She is the mother not just of Israel, but she's the mother of the nations, of the Gentiles. And these Gentile kings are now



coming to worship her son and to bring her gifts, the gifts of gold and frankincense. They are like the beginnings of the fulfillment of prophecy, of the conversion of the nations of the world.

And if you turn to the responsorial psalm we will see some of the same themes. So we look at Psalm 72. This Psalm is also focused on the future conversion of the Gentiles, but the focus isn't so much on Jerusalem, the mother city, it's on a new Solomon, the future King. So Psalm 72:1-2 for example says:

Give the king thy justice, O God,  
and thy righteousness to the royal son!  
May he judge thy people with righteousness,  
and thy poor with justice!

And if you skip down a few verses to verse eight it says:

May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth!  
May his foes bow down before him,  
and his enemies lick the dust!

And then verse 10:

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles  
render him tribute,  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts!  
May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations serve him!

There are a lot of verses that are being quoted here in the Psalm and it is essentially describing this, it is looking forward to a future King who will have several characteristics. First, he will be a righteous King. He is going to rule with peace and justice. Second, he is going to set up a time of everlasting peace. His kingdom will be one where there won't be any more war. Third, he is going to set up a global kingdom, it is going to reach from the river to ends of the earth. That's

far greater than anything that David or Solomon ever had, this global kingdom. Fourth, it is going to be a kingdom of Jews and Gentiles. So it is not just going to be for the Israelites, not just for the 12 tribes, it is going to be for all the peoples of the world. And finally it is going to be a kingdom of mercy. It says that he is going to deliver the needy and is going to care for the poor. So this kingdom is going to be characterized above all by charity. And in the midst of this prophecy of this future king and his future kingdom, you'll see once again that it says that the kings are going to bring him gifts and they're going to bow down before him. In the ancient Greek Old Testament it says *proskyneō*, they are going to worship him. This is being fulfilled in the gifts of the Magi to Jesus.

Which by the way, that gives you the origin of We Three Kings. You may not have thought about this, but maybe you have. Everyone sings that song *We Three Kings of Orient Are* and yet if you look at the Gospel of Matthew, he doesn't say anything about kings, he says magi. He describes wise men, so where did anyone ever get the idea that there were three kings? Well it was in the ancient Christian tradition, it was from reading the New Testament in light of the Old. Because if you go back to the Old Testament, Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72, both of those texts say that the gifts are going to be brought by kings. And then how many gifts do they bring? Three gifts. And so the inference was three kings. And the reason that the Church Fathers made these inferences is because in ancient times it was often the case that a king would also be a wise man, a magi. A perfect example of this is of course Solomon. Solomon was the great example of what ancient philosophers called the philosopher king. In other words, you didn't just want your king to be a ruler, you wanted him to be a wise ruler. You wanted him to be a philosopher king, a magi, someone who was full of wisdom. So that's how we got the tradition of the three Kings of the Orient bringing the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Finally, just in passing real quickly, the second reading for today from Ephesians 3:3-2, 5-6 can be briefly treated. Here St. Paul basically says that a "mystery" has been revealed to him. And what is that mystery? It is that the Gentiles have been made "members of the same body and partakers of the promise" in Christ Jesus. So what the second reading is giving us there is that Paul recognizes that the conversion of the Gentiles is a mystery. It's something that can only be explained by the grace of God finally coming and changing the hearts of the peoples of the world. And this mystery that was spoken of by the prophets is now finally

becoming true in Paul's own day as he goes to the Gentile peoples of the world and, city after city after city after city, you begin to see conversions and conversions so that the pagan peoples of the world inexplicably drop their idols, abandon their temples, and begin worshiping the God of the Jews who has now become man in Christ. That is a great mystery and that's the mystery of the Feast of Epiphany.

So in closing then, I have two thoughts. First from the Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 528, the Catechism describes the Feast of Epiphany as “the manifestation [that is the the best translation of epiphany] of Jesus [not just as] the Messiah... [but as the] Ssavior of the world.” So that the magi are the firstfruits of the Gentile nations. They are like the first reaping of the harvest of souls that are going to be taken from all the various peoples of the world when the pagans begin to discover Jesus, not just as the son of God, but as the one who was prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures. And in fact the Catechism says that it's only by going to the Jewish Scriptures that the pagans can really begin to see who exactly Jesus is, not just one more king, but the Divine Son of God, God made man. That's the first point.

The second point is from the living tradition. One of the questions the Fathers always pondered was is there any deeper significance to the three gifts of gold, frankincense and the myrrh. Matthew highlights those three gifts so is there any deeper significance? We have already seen that they are a fulfillment of prophecy, that is the primary significance, they fulfill Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72. But already in the second century, St. Irenaeus in his famous work *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 9, section 2 says that the gold symbolized the royalty or the kingship of Jesus. The frankincense, which was used in the tabernacle for worship, symbolized the divinity of Jesus, that he's one who's going to be worshipped. And then finally the myrrh, which was an ointment that was used for burial, pointed forward to his passion and his death and his burial. So Irenaeus kind of saw the mystery of his kingship, his passion, and the worship of Christ being hidden in those three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. For what it's worth, this isn't living tradition it is just my own opinion, I've always thought that there might be a deeper significance to the three gifts with reference to Jesus as Priest, Prophet and King. In other words, the gold represents his kingship, the myrrh, which was an anointing oil, represents his identity as a prophet, because prophets would be

anointed to proclaim their message, and then finally the frankincense, which would be used in the Temple, shows that he's a priest. So the gold, frankincense and myrrh shows that he is a King, he is a priest and he is a prophet. It shows his threefold, triple office of Savior of the World. At least that's my take on the great mystery of Epiphany.