

Manifestation

The Epiphany 2010

Matthew 2:1-12

Today is the feast of the **Epiphany**.

There is reference to an official celebration of this aspect of the Nativity as early as the year 361.

“Epiphany” means *manifestation*.

We celebrate Christmas being made known.

More specifically, we celebrate God incarnate, the Word made flesh, *made manifest* to the Gentiles

(i.e. to the rest of the world, beyond the Jewish community),
in the persons of the Magi.

The first to visit the Christ-child were the shepherds,
simple and lowly, who were Jews.

(the story of their visit was read at the dawn Mass of Christmas)

The second to visit the Christ-child were the Magi,
these other figures, wise and powerful,
who represent the learned pagan world.

(the story of their visit, in a sense, concludes the Christmas season;
you may *now* remove the decorations!)

The first reading (Isaiah 60:3) speaks prophetically of them:

**“The Gentiles shall walk in the light,
and kings in the brightness of your rising.”**

The two visits are a response to a mysterious attraction.

The shepherds and the Magi were *drawn*.

There is no commandment; only an *attraction*.

The exact identity of the Magi is difficult to specify.

From where did they come? Who exactly are they?

We can only guess.

The term Magi comes from a Persian term, “mag” for “priest”.

Whatever the case may be—pagan priests, kings, astrologers,
they are traditionally portrayed as coming in full regalia, with gifts.

They come with all their learnedness, rather moved in their minds.

Theirs is an attraction of which we may not often think.

The simplicity of the shepherds, moved in their *hearts*,
seems more accessible.

The Magi, sometimes called the wise men (not wise *guys!*),
are mysteriously moved in their *minds*.

They come reading the stars:
in this case, *a* star, indicating the birth of a king.

These mysterious figures come and they find!
They come and they find *God enfleshed* (!?!?)
Did they know this? It is difficult to say.
Given what they say, we can perhaps say
that they did come expecting divinity: a king from above.

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?

We have seen his star at its rising.”

We can perhaps say that they come because they have been given a gift
from Christ, before even seeing him: *faith*.

This they are given, not because of privilege, but because they are seekers.
God likes seekers.

God extends Himself to those who seek.

Indeed, **“the true light which enlightens everyone,
was coming into the world.”** (John 1:9)

Faith is a gift, given freely, which

- entails a very subtle attraction to God
- enables us to “look” beyond appearances,
to discern mystery from above.

It is interesting and important to note, also,
that faith does not eliminate the use of the mind.

Indeed, the Magi come moved by faith, all the while reading the star...

St. John Chrysostom (+ 407), in a commentary on this,
speaks of these pagan seekers as being gifted with faith

**If the Magi had come in search of an earthly king,
they would have been disconcerted at finding
that they had taken the trouble to come such a long way for nothing.**

Consequently, they would have neither adored nor offered gifts.

**But since they sought a heavenly King,
though they found Him in no signs of royal pre-eminence,
yet, content with the testimony of a star alone, they adored.**

With the eyes of the body they see a fragile infant.
With the eyes of faith they see God.
Only faith can bridge the apparent abyss between child and God.
It is very much like our situation regarding the Eucharist.
Only faith can bridge the apparent abyss between bread and God.
If we do not come to church with living, i.e. loving faith,
we will certainly be disconcerted, and “check out”
—in our heads or altogether.

With the “eyes of faith” we see God.
To “see” God is to *know deep inside*
(without seeing a thing with the eyes of the body).

The Magi come and find.
They find what they were seeking *in faith*,
and they are filled with sublime joy.
The first thing that they do upon seeing the child is to adore.
They “**prostrated themselves and did him homage.**” (verse 11)
Adoration is always the first, fundamental act in the presence of God.

They also offer gifts, gifts in keeping with the reality of this child.
The gifts are revealing for us:

- **gold**, which uniquely shines, reveals Jesus as *king*
- **frankincense**, which rises when burned for prayer,
reveals Jesus as *God*
- **myrrh**, which is used to embalm corpses,
reveals Jesus as *sacrificial lamb*

As we sing in “We Three Kings”,
“**Glorious now, behold him, King and God and Sacrifice**”

More things will later be revealed about the Christ.
But this is the initial revelation to the world, through the Magi.

- Jesus is the King of Kings, who rules with true justice and mercy
- Jesus is God
- Jesus is the One who lays down his life, giving everything

Let us be

- be more mercifully and luminously governed
- experience God
- receive His life