

Epiphany of the Lord

6th JANUARY 2016

“We have seen his star in the east, and are come to adore him.”

– *St. Matthew 2:2.*



We saw and we came. These words of the Wise Men from the East tell us something important about cooperating with God’s grace. *Epiphany* is a word meaning “manifestation”: today we celebrate God’s long-awaited manifestation to the Gentiles, to our own ancestors, to the heathen nations outside the Chosen People of Israel. They also, in ways that words could not quite express, yearned for the Redeemer who had been openly promised to the adorers of the true God. Sometimes called the “Little Christmas,” today’s feast is actually one of the most important in the liturgical year, and like all the Church’s feasts, the Epiphany not only reminds us of a past event but makes present for us God’s grace here and now.

God’s grace does two things for us. *We saw and we came.* First, it illuminates our minds so that we can accept God’s revelation in faith and so that we can understand earthly things in terms of their relationship to God’s plan: will they help or hinder us to go to heaven. Secondly, God’s grace strengthens our will so that we can do what we understand to be right: to overcome temptations and to do good works, in spite of the difficulties and trials, persecution and ridicule that may come our way.

These mysterious wise men from the East – the Scriptures call them *Magi*, after the ancient scholarly class of astronomers originally from Persia; we also think of them as kings because their wisdom and natural authority made their local tribes look to them for direction – these wise men in any case show us concretely how to respond to these two aspects of God’s grace.

We have seen his star. First, they cooperate with God’s invitation by opening up their minds to his truth. Astronomy – the art of seeking wisdom from the order of the heavens – was a form of philosophy widely practiced in the ancient east. It was also an art that could often degenerate into superstition or even outright idolatry: worshiping the heavenly bodies as if they were gods. As St. Augustine said, as he surveyed the wonders of the creation: “I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: and they said, ‘we are not the God whom you seek’” (*Confessions*, X, 6). These Magi understood the sentiment expressed so well by the Book of Wisdom: “let them know how much the Lord of them is more beautiful than they: for the first author of beauty made all those things” (13:3). Perhaps these Magi were descended from Balaam, the Arabian soothsayer who had crossed the Israelites as they were on their way into the

Promised Land and who, although he was called upon to curse the People of God, nonetheless was constrained by the prophetic Spirit to call out: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not near. A star shall rise out of Jacob and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel” (Numbers 24:17). The echo of this prophecy calling through the centuries would have enabled the caste of Eastern astronomers to look out for the star in which their forebear had seen the sign of the Jewish Messiah. In any case, of all the sages, astronomers and philosophers of the East who may have seen the miraculous star that night, only these few Magi understood its significance. Grace first enlightens our mind.

We have come to adore him. Head knowledge is not enough to save us. “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Grace not only enables us to accept the Word of God into our hearts; it also enables us to act upon the light we have received. If faith does not take deep root in our soul, if we do not strive to live according to God’s revealed word, then our religion becomes just a fad that will never last: “the devil cometh, and taketh the word out of their heart, lest believing they should be saved” (St. Luke 8:12). The Magi are saints – indeed they are the first fruits of the Church of the Gentiles – because they knew how to cooperate with God’s grace. And they did so *promptly*: they set out as soon as the awaited star appeared in the heavens; they did so *generously*, not counting the sacrifices of their long and uncertain voyage; they did so *with perseverance*, even after their colleagues no doubt treated them as madmen and the people of Jerusalem met them with steely indifference. “For both the Jews require signs, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness: But unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God, and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (I Corinthians 1:22-25).

Sometimes in our spiritual life, God spends special graces, like the star in the heavens. Other times, he seems to hide himself, as when the star disappeared. Just as the wise men sought God’s will in the guardians of his revelation – the priests of Jerusalem who, unworthy though they were, were the custodians of divine revelation – likewise we must seek God’s will above all in the Word he has revealed in the pages of his Scripture and entrusted to the Church he has founded. “If you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Psalm 94:8). The Magi are living proof of the fact that God does not deny his grace to those who do what they can. But this feast of the Epiphany also shows – in the person of the indifferent scribes of Jerusalem and the hypocritical King Herod – that grace can be resisted. From love of pleasure, a person may blind oneself to God’s truth, like the heathens from whom the Magi came. From indifference, a person may not bother to open his eyes to God’s revelation, like the Jerusalem

scribes who should have known better. From fear that God's plan will undermine our own love of power, a person may even try to snuff out the truth, like Herod. And so, on this feast of the Epiphany we look at the Magi not only as a bit of exotic colour come to light up the Christmas story, but as a challenge for ourselves. Do we always follow God's word when it comes to us in his Church, and in special moments of grace like the appearance of the star, and in times of trial when such consolations disappear? We also must offer God our finest gifts: the incense of faith, offered to the God we see in the form of a man, in his crib and on his cross; the myrrh of hope, when we trust that death is but the prelude to resurrection; the gold of charity, by which we "lay up ... treasures in heaven" (St. Matthew 6:20).

The road ahead of us is full of challenges, but behold his star: come let us adore him!