

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

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.

Gospel Study – *Wise Men Still Seek Him*

Last week, following the great celebration of Christmas, I had a marvelous week-long retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemane. I felt like I was right there with the wise men themselves. One of the memorable points of my retreat was meditation before one of the bronze statues on the grounds of Gethsemane. It's a statue of Mary holding up the Christ child so that everyone could see. Jesus' hands are open and extended as if to welcome and embrace the whole wide world. Underneath this bronze statue was a plaque that read, "The Epiphany." My retreat was something like that—as I hope it will be for all of us this time together today. It was a tiny epiphany of Mary holding up Jesus for us to see and to enjoy.

This is what epiphany means. It's from the Greek word *epiphania*, that means manifestation or revelation. Epiphany is that feast which we celebrate where Jesus was made manifest, or revealed, to the whole wide world. For Matthew, in whose Gospel alone we have this story, this was a very important theme that develops through the entirety of his Gospel and culminates in the revelation that Jesus comes for all nations. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus sends His disciples with that Good News to make disciples of all nations.

Epiphany is like a little Christmas—in fact, it's sometimes called that, you know. Christ comes to us in simple, humble and beautiful ways. Did you know in some countries such as Italy, epiphany is the day in which they give gifts? If you think about it, this is a really fine tradition in so far as this is the day we commemorate the wise men bringing their gifts to the Christ. Of course, we do that today by exchanging gifts with each other. I hope that this Gospel will be a gift; our gift of the Christ coming to us. As we look now and try to get the inside story, we will hopefully begin to see ourselves and our journey to Jesus too.

In joining these wise men, the first question we might ask is, "Who are these guys?" Sometimes we call them 'The Three Kings,' don't we? To begin with, they aren't necessarily three, and they are certainly not kings. That's to say, from the start, that Matthew calls them astrologers, or as they are sometimes referred to as *Magi*. They are not three. Notice, Matthew never tells us how many they are. In fact, the early Eastern tradition named 12 Magi, or astrologers, which would be closer, probably, to the truth because they would have traveled in some kind of caravan that long distance. Presumably they had the company of women too, so we want to be speaking of wise men *and women*; perhaps. They certainly weren't kings, although they probably came to be seen as such because of the gifts of gold that they brought. We will realize later on that these are more symbolic gifts. Tradition began, I guess because of those three gifts, to simplify it and see them as three astrologers, or three visitors from the East. A much later legend even named them, can you guess: Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar. I had to research to find out [those names] myself.

They are sometimes, as I said, called the Magi, which comes from the Greek word, *magos*, that referred to a priestly class in Persia. These men—they would be men in this priestly class—were well educated in Philosophy, and in medicine and in various sciences. They were also very educated in Astronomy which was an important study back then and most of their contemporaries in the educated/academic circles would have studied astronomy because they believed the stars foretold the future. More importantly, even one's destiny is foretold under the star in which they are born. This is not to be confused with astrology of today or the occult. Rather, we would see this priestly class of men to be holy and good men who truly were, most of all, wise men in search of the truth even as wise men of today are forever on this journey in search of the truth.

The question we would do well to ask is, "What led these wise men and women to the Christ-child?" First, we must say what led them was their own search for wisdom. Isn't that what leads many of us to the Lord? How often we hear people tell us about being away from the Church for a number of years but they are searching—more often soul searching, sometimes Church searching. It is usually only after many years of searching that they come to, what they would call home, where they experience the Lord.

We might see these wise men on such a journey of faith; such a search for truth. In a sense, then, they are models for us and can remind all of us how we can discover the Lord today. [We can only discover the Lord] if we are willing to make the same journey and do the same soul searching; the same kind of study. How do we come to that?

The second point, the thing that really guides these wise men, is the star of Bethlehem. What is that star? For Matthew it was a very important feature in his story. I would see it, or interpret it, as the guiding light of their faith. It is that guiding light that leads us to the Lord. I'm sure you know of such guiding lights in your life. They are bright people who shine and radiate a certain brilliance, or goodness, and as it were inspire us and lead us to become like them, or want what they have (the Lord that's in them). There are people that are truly guiding lights that the Lord gives us, that lead us to Him.

Finally, I wouldn't want us to miss this point, these Magi from the East came to know and encounter the Lord because they inquired where the Lord was and studied the Sacred Scripture. It was in the Scripture, and their own (if you will) Bible study, that they were able to determine where this Messiah was to be born. Whenever we ourselves come with a searching mind to study the Scripture we find there the place where the Lord always comes as a guide to us. As we learn about the Lord we can experience the Lord. We should never miss the Lord that when we proclaim the Gospel at Church we begin by saying, "The Lord be with you," and indeed He is.

Whenever we open up the Bible, we open up the door for God to come to us. Whenever we open up the Gospel, as we try to open it up here in our own minds and our own study, we open up our hearts to receiving Jesus in this epiphany. It's my prayer and hope anyway, that whenever we open up the Bible is a tiny epiphany of God making Himself manifest to us and how He works, how He comes to us, how He blesses us today. I believe with all my heart that this is what Jesus wants right here, right now: a tiny epiphany coming to us. We hold Him up to speak to us, to heal us, to help us, to give us whatever it is our hearts and our lives need at this time. The Bible is that compass that always points us in the right direction, if only we would learn to take hold of that more often. It is my greatest hope, in fact I was prayer a lot about this this week while on retreat, "Lord, what is it you want me to do?" What I heard in a week of prayer, being on retreat, about the Lord's mission for me, is to promote Gospel study. To promote the reading and reflecting on the Gospel; believing and trusting that when people read and reflect and pray with the Scripture, then Jesus will be with them. He will come to them and He will lead them to Himself. That's why I'm so convinced that what we are doing here is truly a holy epiphany right now, even as I speak.

Of course we look to these wise men to see how we must respond. It's not enough just to read the Scriptures, as I'll mention momentarily. The wise men, hearing then where the Scriptures were directing them, taking that as their map and their guide, set out to seek the Lord and they found Him, just as the Scriptures foretold the Messiah would be found, in Bethlehem. We will also discover how the Lord comes to us—as the Scriptures suggest He will—in humble and simple ways.

What did they do? They prostrated themselves. Can you picture them kneeling down, realizing that they were on holy ground, in a holy moment, before the holy of holies? They did him

homage. They were moved to worship Him. They came, maybe initially as tourists, but found themselves now as pilgrims. They weren't just searching out of curiosity anymore, but moved by a deep spirituality. They knew they were experiencing something so profound it literally brought them to their knees. You can sense this experience of the holy that was moving in them as they offered then the gifts that they were themselves, symbolized first in gold representing the recognition that Jesus was the king of all creation, thus the gold is the gift honoring His royalty; the dignity of the king.

Secondly frankincense, which you may know, was burned as incense every day in the Temple. It was, and is still to this day, a symbol of worship. We need to understand that they did not bring incense all that way. What they brought was their worship. What they brought was a realization that they were kneeling before the king of creation.

Finally what they brought, oddly, is the gift of myrrh, which you know to be a certain oil that embalms the body of the dead. This would have been symbolic of how later Jesus would be embalmed as the wise and holy women anointed His body and placed Him in the tomb. This is a symbol of Jesus who is recognized as the Savior of the World who sacrificed Himself for us.

As we look at these wise men, we can't help but also take a glance to the other characters of the Gospel. It's just interesting to notice these characters on a stage as drama unfolds because we want to see ourselves somewhere here too, you know? This drama is being developed, and no doubt even today, and the one we see most important to the story is Herod. Herod the Great was a well-known king at the time. He and the Magi stand worlds apart in their response to the Christ child. Herod responds initially with hypocrisy. He expresses his hypocritical interest in their coming to pay this Christ child homage too but knowing that's simply a pretense but really, as we later learn, he responded with great hostility. Something about this Christ the king, threatened this man and his own sense of power.

Today, who are the Herods? We have to ask that question. Are not the Herods in Gospel the same people who will later plot against Jesus and His death because they are threatened by Him? Are there not people today who are really threatened when we talk about Christ? They are threatened when we want to bring prayer into the schools or bring the subject of religion up or ask the question, "What would the Lord want?" There are people who are threatened by our religious conversion or religious interest or our own fervor of faith. They want to plot against that or strategize or politicize it. Do you know what I mean? You recognize that there's a tendency in all of us, not just a certain few of us. Again, we see the Chief Priest and the Scribes. They are the most fascinating characters for me, especially as a priest, because they knew right where to look in the Scriptures to tell these astrologers where to discover the Lord, but isn't it fascinating that it didn't move them to join them? Isn't it interesting that they intellectually knew the Scriptures? They intellectually knew about the Lord but they did not come to personally or intimately know the Lord as the Lord must be known.

Why is it, we must ask, that they did not seek out the Lord if they knew where He was to be born? We have to say that these chief priests, maybe not unlike some of us priests or religious people today, were intelligent but not wise. They were well informed, but were not transformed. My brothers and sisters, the very purpose of the Scriptures that we continually study is to not

simply inform, but to truly transform us. It must move us from here to apply it in our life. We must, after we have searched and studied Scriptures here on Wednesday at noon, go back to work, go back to home, go back to our families, go back to our friends and find the Lord and bring the Lord and share the Lord or it does us no good what so ever. We must be challenged by these characters in the Gospel.

The ultimate question is, how will we respond as we search the Scriptures today? Will we wisely seek out those who are a guiding light to us in life? Will we wisely take this Gospel to heart; take this Scripture I have given you, take it home, reflect on it more and do whatever it tells and leads you to do? Will we wisely come to offer the gift of ourself? The gift of our worship for the Lord? The gift of our love for the Lord? Will it bring us on our knees and lead us to a new life? I think the most interesting line of this Gospel may be the last line. Matthew wisely informs us that once the astrologers experienced the Lord they received a message in a dream not to return to Herod and so they went back to their country by another route. Perhaps this different route home could suggest a real, different way of life; a different course in going about their life, their work and their business.

Maybe it suggests, I would hope for all of us, a different journey that focuses us on what we really need to be focused on, the journey to Jesus; the journey to faith, the journey to holiness and service to the Lord. Will we be the wise men and women who will now take up this journey? That is the question that Matthew would ask of us.

Amen.