

**THE COMING LORD:
BEHOLDING & BELIEVING THE LORD WHO HAS COME
Advent B5 – Isa 60:1-7; Ps 72:1-7, 10-14; Eph 3:1-12; Matt 2:1-12
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*The Twelve Days of Christmas*¹—Don't worry, I am not going to sing the song nor am I going to ask you to sing the song. *The Twelve Days of Christmas*—Where does the number “twelve” come from? In the Eastern Church, Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Christ together with the visit of the shepherds and the adoration of the wise men. In the Western Church, the adoration of the wise men is attached to the Feast of the Epiphany, which is January 6—the twelfth day after Christmas. This makes December 25 through January 5 the “twelve days of Christmas.”

Last Sunday, one of the many passages of the Bible that we read was taken from the Apostle Paul's letter to Titus. In 2:11-14, Paul sees the coming of Christ with a bifocal view: Jesus Christ has come and Jesus Christ is coming. Concerning the first coming, Paul writes: “The grace of God that brings salvation has *appeared*.” Concerning the second coming, Paul writes: “We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious *appearing* . . . of Jesus Christ.” The verb “appeared”² and the noun “appearing”³ come from the Greek term from which we get the word “epiphany.” We live our lives between the epiphany of

¹As to the origin of this familiar Christmas song, separating fact from fantasy is not easy. A popular urban myth that hit the internet in 1995 via the *Catholic Information Network* by Fr. Hal Stockert (<http://www.cin.org/twelvday.html> [12/31/02]) maintains that the song comes from England during the period 1558 - 1829 and was a catechism song to help young Catholics learn the tenets of their faith. The gifts in the song have hidden religious meanings; for example, the partridge in a pear tree is Jesus Christ, the two turtle doves represent the Old and New Testaments, and so on. According to *A Celebration and History* by Leigh Grant, the written lyrics to the song first appeared in *Mirth without Mischief* in the early 1780s in England, and the musical tune apparently dates back much further and came from France. The song was simply a type of memory game played by children and had no religious significance (<http://www.cvc.org/christmas/12days.htm> [12/31/02]).

²ἐπεφάνη (*epephanē*): indicative, aorist, passive, 3rd-person, singular, from ἐπιφαίνω.

³ἐπιφάνειαν (*epiphaneian*): accusative, feminine, singular, from ἐπιφάνεια.

God's grace and the epiphany of God's glory.

In connection with the Church's calendar, the word "epiphany" is used of the yearly festival celebrated on January 6 to commemorate the revelation of Jesus as the Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi (wise men) at Bethlehem.⁴ Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi is the primary passage for Epiphany—the presentation of Christ to the world. But before we read from Matthew's Gospel, we need to read from Isaiah's Prophecy, because one of the scriptures that inspired Matthew in the telling of his story was Isaiah 60.

- ¹Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
- ²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
- ³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
- ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
- ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
- ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.
- ⁷All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
they shall be acceptable on my altar,
and I will glorify my glorious house (Isa 60:1-7, NRSV).

⁴To be more specific, in the Eastern Church from at least the fourth century, the Epiphany celebrated the entire cycle of Christ's appearance in His birth, adoration by the Magi, baptism, and first miracle at Cana. In the Western Church, the feast of the Epiphany celebrates the coming of the Magi and the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. See Gerald O'Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 77.

Israel has had a long season of darkness: she has experienced the despair of exile. Now comes the season of light. But this light is not generated by Israel; it is a gift given by Yahweh—the LORD. God’s glory shines, and when it shines, Israel lives in the glow and becomes herself a light to the nations. And when Israel lifts her eyes from her despair, she will not believe what she sees. Behold! A huge procession from all over the known world is making its way to Jerusalem. Not only are the scattered exiles—the sons and daughters—returning home, they are bringing with them the “wealth of the nations”—camels, gold, frankincense, and flocks. The exiles bring the wealth, not to prosper Jerusalem, but to worship Yahweh—the LORD God. Furthermore, whenever the nations offer their extravagant gifts, they are in fact submitting themselves to God and His purposes for the world. That is what happened with the bringing of “gold, frankincense, and myrrh” as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. God’s presence in the world, through His people, creates light and life for the entire world. We are now ready to read Matthew’s story of the visit of the Magi.

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi [μάγοι – *magoi* – “wise men”] from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ [Messiah] was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel [Micah 5:2].”

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of [frank]incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route (Matt 2:1-12, NIV).

In everyday language, if someone says that they have just had an “epiphany,” what they mean is that they have been hit with a new insight or revelation that came from out of the clear blue sky. Technically, this is a misuse of the term “epiphany”; however, *I would like to suggest that for Matthew’s original hearers or readers, this story must surely have been something of an epiphany in the sense of a shocking revelation that seems to have come from out of nowhere.* Modern churchgoers, for the most part, miss the scandal of the story. We are accustomed to seeing the Magi in Christmas pageants next to the shepherds and angels, and we have come to expect and even welcome the presence of these Magi, or wise men, or three kings of the Orient. They add a dash of color to the spectacle with their royal blue garments embroidered with gold foil. They provide a whiff of the exotic with their Persian ways as smells of spices fill the air. And they sound just the right note of royalty for the child-king in the manger.

But all of these notions were as foreign to Matthew as they are familiar to us. The Magi were almost certainly not royalty—at the most they may have been associated with the royal courts of Persia, but of this we cannot be certain. We do not even know how many of them there were. The long-standing tradition of “three wise men” is mostly based on the dubious deduction that since three gifts were given there must be three gift givers. The idea of three kings was furthered in the eighth century when Saint Bede the Venerable strangely supplied the names of Melchior, Gaspar, and Baltasar for the Magi. Some centuries later, Empress Helena added to the Magi mythology by claiming to have had a vision that led her to the burial site of these three kings. She had the remains exhumed, and the supposed skulls of the three kings remain on display (as of 2001) in Cologne, Germany.

This is, of course, sheer fantasy. It is as factual as Steven Spielberg’s fast-and-loose fiddling with the legend of the Holy Grail or the Ark of the Covenant in the Indiana Jones films. What can be said with some certainty is that these Magi were the ancient equivalent of “magicians”—they were astrologers and stargazers who tried to get a scoop on present and future events by staring into the stars. They wrote the daily horoscopes for the local newspapers. The Old Testament actually condemns folks like the Magi, considering them to be idolatrous deceivers who are to be avoided by godly people. Not long before the birth of Jesus, a Jewish rabbi penned these words: “He who learns from a

magi is worthy of death.”

Strangely enough, in Matthew’s Gospel these Magi managed to get at least one thing right: something on a cosmic/universal scale had occurred in Bethlehem of Judea. By their lights they somehow correctly sensed from the heavens that something of supreme significance had happened on earth. They were so sure of this that they undertook a long and dangerous journey to investigate the matter. And Matthew places these stargazing magicians at the side of the Messiah. Few in Matthew’s largely Jewish audience would have welcomed these Magi. Besides, these were the same bumbling who tipped off Herod, leading to the slaughter of innocent children. Any fool who had even the slightest inkling of Herod’s raging paranoia would know that coming to him with news of a new king in the area was like tossing a match into a gas can. To Matthew’s audience, the Magi were not very wise and they were not welcome.

Matthew, however, has been presenting similar scandals from the very start of his Gospel. In the opening genealogy he includes not only four women, but four women each of whom had something foreign or scandalous attached to her. Tamar played the prostitute in order to become pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah. Rahab *was* a prostitute, and from Jericho at that. Ruth brings the Moabites into the picture, and although Bathsheba is not specifically named, Matthew finds a way to “twist the knife” by referring to Solomon’s mother as “Uriah’s wife” (and everyone remembers what David did to Uriah!).

So, what is Matthew up to? What is he trying to do? *I think Matthew is seeking to strike a universal tone in his Gospel.* He wants not just men but women included; not just Israelites but people from all nations; not just those whose lives seem orthodox and ordinary but even Magi who could not have seemed less likely candidates for God’s love. Do not misunderstand what I am saying. Matthew is not condoning astrology or contradicting the Bible’s earlier warnings against diviners and deceivers such as these Magi. *What Matthew is trying to communicate is the reach of God’s grace.* Matthew is giving a Gospel sneak preview: the Christ child who attracted these odd Magi to His cradle will later have the same magnetic effect on Samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors on the take, despised Roman soldiers, and ostracized lepers. Furthermore, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel it is no longer a matter of non-Jews

coming to Bethlehem, but of Jewish disciples going out to all the nations.

Matthew 2 truly is an epiphany for any and all who think that salvation is a members-only club and that the members are easily recognizable to those who are in the know. The Epiphany question of Matthew 2 is: Who are today's Magi? What people or types of people make us uncomfortable or upset when they try to come to the Christ? As we approach the new year, this Epiphany story should provoke us to ponder what kind of church we want to be. How wide open is the front door? How wide open are the hearts of those of us already on the inside? What will outsiders sense if they themselves come inside?

During the Christmas season it is easy to look at nativity scenes and find them lovely and maybe even moving. It is so easy to view the hodgepodge of shepherds, Magi, animals, new parents, angels, and the infant in the middle of it all and not bat an eye at the spectacle of all those wildly diverse people and creatures dwelling under one little roof. But then the season ends, and the nativity scenes are packed away for another year. *Whether or not we recognize Epiphany as a religious holiday, we all need to receive the epiphany of Matthew 2. We need to awaken to the reality that the church is likewise filled with a motley hodgepodge of all kinds of different people, all standing together around the Christ under one roof, and all called together by one and only one thing—the grace of God.*

The church as a nativity scene—think about it—an unlikely collection of radically different people congregated under one roof around the Christ. Now that is an “epiphany” we all need to experience, for it is a revelation of the universal, unconditional grace of God.

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