

## Epiphany “A Closer Look at Herod and the Magi”

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It is interesting how sometimes the words we use have a way of being watered down in our culture. Take the word epiphany. It is a word that comes from the Greek word Epipháneia meaning manifestation or appearance. It was a word originally associated with an encounter with the divine, like we have with our feast day today, celebrating adventurers who followed a star and found themselves encountering the Son of God himself. Over time, however, it is my personal belief the word epiphany has morphed into something more trivial and mundane as in having what we might call just a new insight or an “aha” moment of sorts...which for me waters down what the word “epiphany” is really meant to convey. For instance, we could use in common parlance in the moment say when a child discovers peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that the child had an epiphany that “hey, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches taste really good”. You see, I don’t think this is the best usage of the word epiphany. Neither would the insight like I had last night, “Gee, the Seahawks’ season could be over.” Not really an epiphany. Well, never fret. At least we have the Mariners to look forward to. Of course, the statement, “I think the Mariners are going to have a great team this coming year” isn’t the exactly the best use of the word “epiphany” either! That would be more of a “credo quae absurdum”, “I believe because it is absurd!” No, the word epiphany is best used when associating with a meaningful encounter with the divine, with God, like we have in our Gospel reading today.

Another word that somehow got muddled through the centuries is the word “magi”. As we can see in our Gospel reading today, the magi were astrologers from the east who were following a star. They were more like priests than kings. The word “magic” and “magi” share the same root. The fact that they were inferred as kings might be due to the audience that they had with King Herod or the Christmas song that is so very popular this time of year, but there is actually no mention in the Gospel of Matthew that they were kings or how many of them there were. We infer that there were three of them from the number of gifts they brought...and the song “we three kings” is still quite lovely. I don’t want to be a Fr. Killjoy today so we can still enjoy singing it, I hope we do, especially since it has been handed down to us over the centuries that at least three of the magi’s names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. There is in fact a lovely house blessing that can be performed with chalk on the front door of a home using their initials. These initials invoke their intercession but also have the double meaning, “Christus Mansionem Benedicat” which is translated as “Christ bless our home”. You can find this blessing on Catholic websites and is a fun family activity.

The three gifts the magi bring have significance as well as many of you know. Gold is a kingly gift that recognizes that Jesus is the new King David. Frankincense is incense that recognizes that Jesus is also divine, the Son of God. Myrrh was actually used in part as a burial ointment so the gifts that the magi bring are meant to catechize us that Jesus is fully human and fully divine; and foreshadow Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection for the sake of our salvation. That these magi were exotic non-Jewish astrologers from the East also foreshadows that the gift of salvation isn’t limited to just Israel but is rather a gift meant to be shared with the entire world.

All of these insights are helpful for understanding this feast day in a deeper way, however, I want us to reflect on the word “epiphany” a bit more. You see, in our Gospel reading, we encounter Herod who is very hostile to the thought of encountering the divine. He is very hostile to the thought of a Christ child. The idea of the Son of God being born in his kingdom was a threat to him. He was more interested in safeguarding his power and the many, many comforts he enjoyed. This got me thinking: all the comforts we enjoy can certainly be seen as blessings much of the time, but it must be said that all the comforts we enjoy can also be at times a hindrance or even a roadblock to encountering the divine. What I mean by this is we only have so many hours in the day and we only have so many days in our lifespan. And so, why spend any more time to pray each day when I can spend more time staring into my screen? We end up making bad choices like that sometimes, opting for what is ultimately lesser treasure. And so, it must be said that comforts can sometimes be a hindrance to experiencing real epiphanies of our own in life. The extreme example of this is King Herod, but we can all fall into this trap along our spiritual journeys. This is why spiritual masters over the centuries have recommended a fair measure of prayer and even fasting at times for those who wish to encounter the divine in more meaningful way. Even Jesus in his ministry said that those who wish to be his disciples must pick up their cross and follow him. I believe this is something for us to consider as we enter into a New Year, if we truly want to have a deeper encounter with the divine in our lives.

The magi in our Gospel reading stand in stark contrast to King Herod. These are people who sacrificed a lot of comforts and risked many dangers to make their pilgrimage to encounter the Lord. They represent the human condition of a people wandering in darkness seeking light. And aren't we all that way at times? We all find ourselves at times in life walking in darkness seeking light. Our magi sacrificed much so to encounter the light of Christ, and so must we, if we really want to encounter the Lord in a more meaningful way in our life.

And so, the question this feast day ultimate poses to us in my opinion is: what is holding us back? What is holding us back from embarking on an adventure, a real adventure, to seek God in a more meaningful way in our life? If we are honest with ourselves, what is holding us back could very well be a fear of losing some of the comforts we cling to or even addicted to. And as precious as gold, frankincense and myrrh were in those days, the gift Jesus gave our adventurers in our Gospel reading today was far more valuable, far more precious. For the epiphany, the revelation given to the magi this day, was nothing less than the hope for eternal salvation through Christ our Lord. Amen.