

# 01 / 06: The Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles

## Propers

### Seasonal Greeting (for Epiphany season)

**Celebrant:** I will make you as a light for the nations,

**People:** that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. Isaiah 49:6.

### Collect

O God, who by the leading of a star, manifested your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, who know you now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of your glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Readings

1. Ephesians 3:1–12.
2. Matthew 2:1–12.

### Suggested Introit and Gradual Psalms

Psalms 72.1–7 and 72.8–11 respectively.

### Proper Preface for Epiphany

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who took on our mortal flesh to reveal His glory; that he might bring us out of darkness and into his own glorious light. Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels ...

# Introduction

Yesterday, being 6 January, was Epiphany, the end of the Christmas season. Several weeks ago I mentioned the dangers of sentimentality in Christmas leading us away from the truth regarding our sin and thereby diminishing the magnitude of God's grace in Christ's first Advent.

The same dangers exist in Epiphany.

The story in Matthew 2 about the Magi is strangely sparse.

There is much we don't know.

- We don't know how many there were (3, 12?),
- whether they were indeed kings (or Zoroastrian priests?),
- or exactly where they came from (Yemen, Iran, India?)
- We do not know exactly how old Jesus is; he may have been as old as 2 years, a toddler.
- We do know that they found Jesus in a house, not a stable.
- And we know the gifts that they brought.

My concern is that in adding to the story we may be missing the story. I would like us to observe two things today.

- 1) God's sovereign control,
- 2) God's voice.

## God's Sovereign Control

There is a startling convergence of elements in this story that point to God's sovereign control.

– Different religion: these men may well have been Zoroastrian.

Zoroastrianism is an old dualistic religion, in which there are two supreme beings: Ahura Mazda (good) and Angra Mainyu (bad). Not Jewish, in any event.

– Different culture: whether these men are from the same country, or from several, we don't know. They are clearly of different cultural backgrounds.

– Different status in life: various researches seem to suggest that these men were likely of a priestly caste, rather than royal. They are of a loftier estate than the family of Jesus.

– We have this celestial body: whether a star, an alignment of planets or constellations. Whatever it was, it was supernatural event leading these men to an obscure little town called Bethlehem, perhaps even directly to the house

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<sup>1</sup> In Eastern Christianity, the number is often listed as 12. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_Magi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi).

where Jesus was.

This was manifestly not one of the common stars of Heaven. First, because none of the stars moves in this way, from east to south, and such is the situation of Palestine with respect to Persia. Secondly, from the time of its appearance, not in the night only, but during the day. Thirdly, from its being visible and then again invisible; when they entered Jerusalem it hid itself, and then appeared again when they left Herod. Further, it had no stated motion, but when the Magi were to go on, it went before them; when to stop, it stopped like the pillar of cloud in the desert. Fourthly, it signified the Virgin's delivery, not by being fixed aloft, but by descending to earth, shewing herein like an invisible virtue formed into the visible appearance of a star.<sup>2</sup>

– The fact that they went to Herod's household and got the information they needed from an enemy – from his advisors actually – means that the necessary information was made available to them.

Doesn't this teach us the importance of trust? The value of prayer? The God who can bring together all these unrelated threads into one flawless piece of cloth can order our lives also!

God is sovereign over circumstance. He has always been. He certainly was in this circumstance. And he always will be. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever will be, unto the ages of ages.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” (Matthew 10:29)

If even the dumb beasts flitting around our heads find their continuance and end in the will of the Father, how much more ourselves?

Should I take this stand? Should I say this thing? Should I speak or be silent? Should I marry this one or not? Should I take this job, quit that job, go into business for myself or not? Should we change our family situation, move to a different house, change churches, what should we do? Will this disease kill me? Why is this happening? How should I pray? What should I expect?

I have no star to guide me. No shepherds. No angels singing. What could have been more miraculous for the magi than to simply start their journey and end up at the house where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were?

Even if God has spoken to them in dreams, visions, hand-writing on the wall, or some other supernatural event, that still would not have fulfilled the desire of God and would not have led them to see the king of the universe in a manger! It was only when they obeyed and went.

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<sup>2</sup>

file:///Users/markrudolph/Documents/Docs/0TheologicalResources/CCEL/ccelv4/a/aquin

Are we going to let these pagan astronomers outperform our faith?

## God's Voice

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets." (Hebrews 1:1)

Remember that John the baptizer—the cousin of Jesus—was the last of the OT prophets. Now God has turned up the volume.

– Zechariah's visitation as priest offering incense in the temple. The prayers went up and the answer came down from an angel of the Lord (Luke 1:11).

- Mary's visit by an angel
- Joseph's dreams
- Elizabeth's revelation
- Angel choirs
- Stunned shepherds
- An upset King and kingdom
- Foreign visitors

God is almost screaming! But not everyone listens.

- ◆ ◆ "Listening badly"
  - - Herod
  - Herod's advisors: still kind of puzzled that they aren't curious enough to investigate for themselves. Isn't this exactly what John may have had in mind when he wrote:

"He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him." (Joh 1.10-11)

- ◆ ◆ "Listening well"
  - - Redneck shepherds
  - - Pagan astronomers/astrologers, priests from another religion
  - A simple girl, an old woman and her husband, and a carpenter: they all get it.

I especially think of these men from a faraway land who come looking for a king.

See how they made their address to him when they had found him, v. 11. We may well imagine their expectations were raised to find this royal babe, though slighted by the nation, yet honourably attended at home; and what a disappointment it was to them when they found a cottage was his palace, and his own poor mother all the retinue he had! Is this the Saviour of the world? Is this the King of the Jews, nay, and the Prince of the kings of the earth? Yes, this is he, who, though he was rich, yet, for our sakes, became thus poor. However, these wise men were so wise as to see through this veil, and in this despised babe to discern the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father; they did not think themselves balked or baffled in their enquiry; but, as having found the King they sought, they presented themselves first, and then their gifts, to him.<sup>3</sup>

They declared his worth in worship!

“After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him.” (Matthew 2:11)

They fulfill the ancient promise of God in Isaiah 45:23.

“I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness And will not turn back, That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.”

As Paul puts it:

“... Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:5–11)

Now we have a much better voice than the one that was crying in the wilderness. We have God’s exact voice in Christ himself.

One of the curses of Scripture, both old and new Testaments, is that those who have eyes and ears neither see nor listen. The eyes of those who should have known better were closed to what they saw.

“For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry’s Commentary on this section of Scripture.

would heal them.” (Act 28.27)

With what kind of ears do we listen?

## Conclusion

With exquisite tact and reverence the narrative attempts not the faintest description of the scene. It is as if the sacred writer had fully entered into the spirit of St. Paul, ‘Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more.’ And thus it should ever be. It is the great fact of the manifestation of Christ—not its outward surroundings, however precious or touching they might be in connection with any ordinary earthly being—to which our gaze must be directed. The externals may, indeed, attract our sensuous nature; but they detract from the unmatched glory of the great supersensuous Reality. Around the Person of the God-Man, in the hour when the homage of the heathen world was first offered Him, we need not, and want not, the drapery of outward circumstances. That scene is best realized, not by description, but by silently joining in the silent homage and the silent offerings of ‘the wise men from the East.’<sup>4</sup>

Likewise gathering around the child and offering ourselves, our souls and bodies as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice.

Jesus: you own me! I am yours!

Even if God has spoken to them in dreams, visions, hand-writing on the wall, or some other supernatural event, that still would not have fulfilled the desire of God and would not have led them to see the king of the universe in a manger! It was only when they obeyed and went.

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<sup>4</sup> “Life and Times ...”, Edersheim, “From the Manger in Bethlehem ...”, Chapter 8, p. 228.