

## The Solemnity of the Epiphany

“Nations will be drawn to your light, and kings to the dawning of your new day.”  
Isaiah 60, 3.

Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying: “Where is the new-born king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.”  
Matthew 2, 1-12

The readings for today’s solemnity clearly make the point that God’s salvation is not confined to the people of Israel but is intended for all the peoples of the world, referred to variously in Scripture as “the Nations” or “the Gentiles.” Today’s second reading from Ephesians refers to “God’s secret plan” as though it were something God had been cooking up all along. In the gospel, the Magi are a symbol of the non-Jewish world coming to Jesus to pay homage to him and to discover something that will change their lives.

The story of the Magi is one of the great imaginative stories in Scripture. It has fascinated scholars and captured the imagination of Christians and commentators through the centuries. Matthew gives the Magi no names because that fits the point of his story. If they had names they would more easily be able to be tracked down by Herod’s henchmen. To name them would have put them and any of their families at risk of harm from a Herod who was prepared to stop at nothing in order to eliminate any potential rivals to his throne. As the Christian imagination expanded, it would seem that artists and story-tellers could not resist giving the Magi names. The names they attributed to them somehow had to match their mysterious origins. It seems that the very first mention of names for them is to be found in the exceptional mosaics situated in the Ravenna Cathedral where they are called by the exotic names of Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar. The responsorial psalm from today’s liturgy states: “The kings of Arabia will come bearing gifts.” (Ps 72) This has prompted some scripture scholars to speculate that the Magi might well have been priests of the Persian prophet Zoroaster who lived about six hundred years before Christ. Followers of Zoroaster, or Zoroastrians as they are now called, have had their fair share of persecution. They were driven out of Persia by the Muslims and most fled to India, congregating around Mumbai. They are small in number because they do not accept converts. Membership comes through birth, and Zoroastrians tend to have small families. What is significant about them is that they believe that every good person has a guiding light in the galaxy which appears as a star. The brightness of the star is in proportion to the importance of the person. The plausible conclusion is that the Magi were Zoroastrian priests who, on seeing an exceptionally bright star, set out to discover and meet the great person whose guiding light was the star they saw. It is interesting to note that a very significant god for Zoroastrians is Ahura Mazda, the god of light. (Mazda, of course, is a popular brand of electric light bulb sold in many countries around the world.)

What is important for us is that these Magi - irrespective of whether they were Zoroastrian priests or wise men or astrologers - are symbols of each of us. We, like them, have embarked on a faith journey in search of the One who will ultimately give us satisfaction and fulfillment. Put simply, our lives are a journey on which we all embark in our search to satisfy our human ache for God, something we share with the Magi and all of humanity. Along the way we have to negotiate the challenges and

obstacles that are part of growing through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. Every stage has its risks and particular hurdles that come from within. There are also obstacles from without, put in our way by scheming and unscrupulous people who are intent on deluding and seducing us, the modern-day Herods whose self-interest overrides the rights and dignity of others. There are people who will try to seduce us with the same kind of sweet-talking lie that Herod put to the Magi: “Pretending to be as devout as they were, Herod got the Magi to tell him exactly when the star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem and said: ‘Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.’” (Matthew 2, 7-8)

But when challenges arise for us, help is available to us in different forms. The Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. “Angels” come into our lives in various guises - in the friends, relatives and supporters on whom we can rely when we are faced with difficult decisions, in the guides and teachers who have shown us the alternative path of the Gospel and right values on which to base our choices and decisions.

And then, there is the journey’s end. For the Magi it was a meeting with the sacred, an encounter with the Christ Child to whom they offered their gifts. Similarly, in our journeying, we will encounter Christ - present in the most unexpected places and in the most unlikely people - to whom we are invited to minister whenever we come face-to-face with the poor, the forgotten and the needy.

Perhaps a fitting conclusion to this reflection on the Magi or the three Wise Men is to recall the story-line of a Christmas oratorio entitled “The Other Wise Man.” It is based on a book written by a 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian minister, Henry Van Dyke. It’s the story of Artaban who sold all he had to purchase three valuable gem stones which he had hoped to present to the new-born Christ Child. His plan was to journey with the other three Wise Men to wherever the star would lead them. However, Artaban was delayed and failed to meet up with his intended travelling companions. He ended up spending the whole of his life searching. On his travels, he gave away one, and then a second, of his precious stones to people in need. Finally, he reached Jerusalem where a large crowd had gathered to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover. There was quite a commotion when he entered the city, but he soon learned from a passer-by that the Romans were about to crucify three criminals, one of whom, according to Pilate, called himself “King of the Jews”. Artaban could hardly believe his ears. “At last, I have found my King”, he thought to himself. He hurried on to catch sight of the man who called himself “King of the Jews”, but his way was blocked by another group of soldiers dragging a young girl down the street. When she spotted Artaban in his fine clothes, she called to him to help her. Taking pity on her, Artaban gave her his last gem stone to pay her way to freedom. It was precisely then that the sun was darkened and the city was shaken by an earthquake. Artaban was mortally wounded by fallen masonry and, as he lay dying, he heard a voice: “As long as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” Artaban had, indeed, finally found his King.