

Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ – January 7, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,050 words

On this Feast of the Epiphany we hear in the gospel about the magi or wise men; we also call them “kings” in our Christian tradition. Whatever their status was – whether only wise men or also even kings – they are rather mysterious figures, and it would be wise for us to seek to understand more fully who they were, so also to learn from them.

The magi make only a brief appearance in the gospels and we know very little about them. The first thing of note is that nowhere does it say that there were three of them; this idea probably comes from their having brought three gifts. We do not know their names, either; tradition gives them as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, but Christians in the Far East know them by other names. Neither do we know for sure that they were kings, although it is possible; the idea that they were, probably comes from the references in our first reading and also in the responsorial psalm, where three kings are mentioned. Finally, we are not even quite sure what qualified them to be called “magi” or “wise men”. It appears that they were leaders of an ancient Persian religion, and that their studies in astrology and religious prophecies made them able to understand what the new star in the sky meant.

Fortunately, there is much that we can reflect on in connection with what we do know about them, which centers on the three gifts that they brought, as well as their ethnic and religious background. We will start with the gifts: the famous gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gold and frankincense were prophesied in today’s first reading, which said that “all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord”. In the scriptures, “Sheba” is sort of a code word for “the farthest eastern point in the known world”; and indeed, the magi or wise men in the gospel are said to have come from the East. The gold that they brought was a sign of kingship. The frankincense was a sign of divinity, as incense is used in worship. Therefore, in bringing gold and frankincense, the wise men were acknowledging Christ to be both King and God.

The third gift of myrrh was not prophesied, at least not in the first reading. What’s more, it was an unusual gift, one that must have given pause to Our Lady and Joseph. Looking through the scriptures, we find in the book of Exodus that myrrh was mixed in liquid form together with other aromatics like cinnamon, to make an oil to anoint priests; in other words, it was part of the ordination ritual. And in the gospel of John we see that myrrh was part of the oils used for embalming. Incidentally, there is a polite reference to myrrh as “bitter perfume” in the carol “We Three Kings”, but in reality, it is not like a perfume at all: in its pure form, it smells something like burning rubber. One of the reasons that it was used in embalming was to mask the smell of the corpse! Considering these uses of myrrh, it seems that the magi had a profound insight into the person of Christ: they understood that this king had come not simply to rule, but also to offer sacrifice. He was to be both priest and victim, sacrificing himself for his people.

We can also learn from the wise men’s ethnic and religious background: they were Gentile pagans who came to worship the King of the Jews. This teaches us something about the people for whom our Lord would die, namely, that he came not just for the Jews but for the whole world. This had been prophesied in the Old Testament; even still, it was not something that many people at that time were really expecting. St. Paul therefore marveled in today’s second reading about how the Gentiles are full heirs of the promises of God, equal with the Jews. The Jewish shepherds had come first to worship the infant Jesus, just as the Jews had been the first chosen by God. But now, the later arrival of the magi also to worship the divine child is a symbol of how God opens his kingdom to all people of every race.

Everyone needs Jesus, and the good news is that Jesus is for everyone. And this is the message of the Feast of the Epiphany: that the whole world belongs to Christ, and Christ gives himself to the whole world. Even as a little baby at home with his mother and foster-father, he is recognized by the wise men as God and king, priest and victim. Those who are truly wise still seek him today, and they recognize him for who he is, not merely who they wish him to be. So many people try to fashion Christ in a self-serving way; let's say as a cozy friend who overlooks or even ignores their faults and failures. He surely is a friend, but the Epiphany reveals to us that he is also Almighty God, King of all, who came to die for our sins. If we meditate on these truths, then we might not be as tempted to take our relationship with him so lightly or have a distorted image of him. We will want to live more fully for him; we will marvel at his humble greatness and seek to imitate him, which indeed is what he commands us to do – as he will tell us when he is older to take up our crosses and follow him.

The gospel does not tell us how many wise men came to see Christ, perhaps to leave the number open to include us also. As we begin this new year, let us seek Christ out each day and reflect more deeply on who he is and what that reality both means for us and demands of us. In other words, may we grow in wisdom – not the wisdom of this world, which is often really quite shallow – but the wisdom of God, which is far more profound, and promises us so much more than we could ever imagine. We pray for a new year of wisdom and peace!