

Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord, C – January 6, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

The gospel for the Epiphany presents a very dramatic scene with great personages involved. There are these mysterious magi or kings from the East, about which we know very little. We deduce that there were three of them, from the three gifts that they brought.¹ Then there is another king – the nefarious King Herod. And, of course, there is also the King of the Jews, our Lord, called that by none other than Herod. It is a scene rife with royalty of every stripe.

But there is another royal in this scene also; we deduce that, interestingly enough, from who is not mentioned. It said that the magi were “overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother”. Was Saint Joseph not also there? Surely, he was! But it says nothing about him. He must have been quietly standing in the shadows. And the omission of him from the historical record, in fact, highlights who the other royal was.

“They saw the child with Mary his mother”. The magi already knew that they were seeking out the King of the Jews – the infant Jesus. When they found him, though, they also met the Queen Mother. In ancient Israel, a king often had multiple wives – a harem.² But he only had one mother, and she was accorded the dignity of queen, being given authority in his kingdom and being granted to sit on a throne at his right hand.³ She even was permitted to wear a crown.⁴

By leaving St. Joseph out of this scene, St. Matthew emphasizes that these mysterious kings from the East, sent there at a wicked king’s bidding, find not only the King of the Jews but also their Queen. And in paying homage to Jesus and Mary they demonstrate the proper order of things: namely, that earthly power derives from heavenly and must submit to it. In this scene the prophecy of the Responsorial Psalm begins to be fulfilled: “All kings shall pay him homage...”.

Wasn’t it just like St. Joseph not to make the final editorial cut in this scene? I do believe he was there. He may have even held the crown of each of the magi-kings⁵ as they approached to do homage to Jesus and Mary. But otherwise, just as elsewhere in the gospels, he is silent, nearly invisible. Like all the best security agents, he never eclipsed the ones he protected, but was ever vigilant by them in a most discreet way, guarding them and keeping them safe.

And so, having been overjoyed to find not only Jesus but his Queen, the magi-kings return home, heeding the warning they received in a dream not to go back to Herod. What did they do when they went home? They went back to doing what they did – but now, having submitted their rule to Christ’s. Their purpose was fulfilled; we do not need to know much more about them, so the scriptures are silent about how their history continued and concluded.

We do know about King Herod, however. He was a schemer. He was disingenuous. He killed several of his own family members. He never really wanted to honor Christ, for he saw him as a threat. Indeed, after this scene, he would order the slaughter of the innocents in an effort to eliminate this infant-king and so preserve his power. But what if he had done Christ homage, and submitted to his higher authority? Jesus would have taken nothing from him!

Well, except for one thing: our Lord would have freed him from corruption – saved him from it. He would have given Herod a new hope: the possibility of a future not only in this life

¹ We also deduce this from Old Testament prophecy. For example, Psalm 72:10-11 speaks of the kings of Tarshish, Arabah, and Sheba, who each bring a gift for the Savior-King. This psalm is both the Responsorial Psalm and the Offertory Antiphon for today’s Mass.

² King Solomon, for example, had 700 wives! See 1 Kings 11:3.

³ See 1 Kings 2:19.

⁴ See Jeremiah 13:18.

⁵ It is fun to note that in Hispanic countries they overcome some of the mystery around whether these characters were magi, kings, or wise men (which is really a variant on ‘magi’), simply by hyphenating: they traditionally refer to them as “magi-kings”. Problem solved!

but in the next. This is the lesson for all of us to learn, also. In submitting all of who we are to the Lord, he never takes away anything that is good. The only thing he desires to take from us is what is bad and evil. And he not only takes it away but gives us many blessings besides.⁶

Yes, when we submit ourselves fully to Christ the Lord, we also find the help of the Queen, seated at his right hand and capable of obtaining from him things we would never dare ask. How wonderful it is to find Christ with his dear Mother and ours! But do not forget that St. Joseph is there also, even if he is quietly watching from the shadows, barely noticed by others. On this Epiphany, let us pray about what gifts we are prepared to offer the King of kings – the best of which is the gift of ourselves: our minds and our hearts, our time and our possessions; all that we have and all that we are.

⁶ It is well worth reading in this regard the final paragraph of the Homily for the Inauguration of the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, accessible at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.