

The Epiphany of the Lord (Years A, B, C)

Introduction

“Every year on the Second Sunday after Christmas, the Church celebrates the great feast of Epiphany. And on this feast the readings are the same: whether it’s year A, B, or C, we are going to look at the same readings every single year. This is of course the great day where we celebrate the mystery of the revelation, or the unveiling, of Christ’s kingship and his divinity. That is what Epiphany means, it is a kind of revelation or unveiling or appearing is actually probably a better translation. And in this case, it’s the appearing of Christ the King, Christ the divine Son of God” ~ Dr. Brant Pitre

“The Epiphany literally manifests the method by which God unceasingly breaks into our life, shaking us out of our inertia, rekindling cast-off desires, and spurring us to a depth of living we thought impossible. God comes to us a surprise. The Father does not send a teaching, a message, but his Son in the flesh.” ~ Fr. Peter John Cameron

First Reading: Isaiah 60:1–6

Isaiah 60 is a prophecy of the new Jerusalem. The prophet addresses the city as if it were a person. So in the book of Isaiah there was this expectation that one day Jerusalem would be made new, it would be a new Jerusalem, and this new Jerusalem is so glorious and so beautiful that she is described as a woman, as a bride, as the bride of God.

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah is describing the ancient Jewish hope that one day Gentiles — the pagan nations (*goyim*) of the world — will convert and go on pilgrimage to the new Jerusalem.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,

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**the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.**

The gold and frankincense are signs that they have converted to the truth of the God of Israel, of worshiping the God of Israel.

In the Gospel today, the Magi fulfill this prophecy... but they bring the gifts to Mary and the Christ child, not the new Jerusalem. Matthew might be hinting here that Mary is the new Jerusalem.

Response: Psalm 72:11

**¹¹May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.**

Psalm: Psalm 72:1–2, 7–8, 10–11, 12–13

**¹Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.**

**²May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.**

**⁷In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.**

**⁸May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.**

**¹⁰May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.**

**¹¹May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.**

The kings will worship (*proskyneō*) him. This is fulfilled in the Gospel.

**¹²For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.**

**¹³He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.**

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The responsorial psalm has a similar theme to the 1st reading — the future conversion of the Gentiles. But it focuses more on the new Solomon, the future king.

Solomon is a type of Magi king, a man full of wisdom. Jesus perfectly fulfills this too.

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:2–3a, 5–6

²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,

⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

What **mystery** has been revealed? That the Gentiles have been made “members of the same body and partakers of the promise” in Christ Jesus

Gospel: Matthew 2:1–12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

Since **Herod** was a ‘puppet’ king (under Roman rule) and a half-Jew (an Idumean), he was not very excited to hear about a new and authentic king being born. Josephus and other writers attest to Herod’s extremely wicked acts to keep his kingship, killing his wife and three sons.

“So with that in mind you can see already the scene is set here for this fake King, this half Jewish king, who tries to act like he’s the true Messiah, act like he’s the true King, being threatened by the authentic King finally being born into the world. So that is the first thing, this drama of the tension between Herod and then the child king” ~ Dr. Pitre.

In the 1st century A.D., we hear from ancient pagan writers like Suetonius and Tacitus that the gentiles too were expecting that a Jewish king and Messiah would arise. Hence, the wise men emerge.

The **wise men** were typically seen as “great philosophers, astronomers, astrologers, who were often members of royal courts who would act as advisors to the king, who were known for their wisdom and their learning and their knowledge, as well as their ability to read the signs of the heavens, to read the signs in the stars in the sky” (Dr. Pitre).

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The wise men are considered **kings** because this fulfills the 2 prophecies we read earlier (Isaiah 60 and Ps 72) about kings bringing gifts. In ancient times, a king would also be a wise man, a Magi.

“The way the poet T. S. Eliot imagines them seems right to me. The Magi lived a life packed with privilege: summer palaces, lounging on terraces, silken girls, sherbet served cool and sweet. Yet, for all its delights, this for them was not enough. In fact, each pleasure indulged only increased the unignorable gnawing within...the craving for an Infinite Something to satisfy all longing. Pope Benedict XVI referred to the Magi as “men with a restless heart” who were “driven by a restless quest for God...filled with expectation.... They were looking for something greater.... They wanted to know how we succeed in being human.” They were people “inwardly seized by God.” ~ Fr. Peter John Cameron

Pope Benedict XVI writes: “we have to ask what sort of people they were ... Magi are understood to be members of the Persian priestly caste. In Hellenistic culture they were regarded as ‘rulers of a distinctive religion’ ... they were nevertheless custodians of religious and philosophical knowledge that had developed in that area and continued to be cultivated there. ... *The key point is this: the wise men from the east are a new beginning. They represent the journeying of humanity toward Christ.* They initiate a procession that continues throughout history. Not only do they represent the people who have found the way to Christ: *they represent the inner aspiration of the human spirit*, the dynamism of religions and human reason toward him.”
~ Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives, pgs. 92; 94; 97

² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

His star:

There is an implicit prophecy here from **Numbers 24:15-17**, where the pagan prophet Balaam gives the “prophecy of the star.” It is possible that the wise men knew of this prophecy and recognized that when the star rose out of Jacob, that the scepter—the symbol of the King—would also rise in Israel.

Many ancient Church Fathers believed the star was an **angel**. The fact that this star rises in the heaven and then leads the Magi to the very house where Mary and Joseph and the child are, suggests that it is not just a purely natural phenomenon. If you go outside sometime and try to follow a star to a particular house, you’ll never make it there. It doesn’t work that way. Also, in the Bible, very frequently stars are depicted as angels and angels are depicted as stars.

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

**⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;**

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**for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”**

Bethlehem is the famous city of David (see 1 Samuel 16).

The explicit prophecy quoted in Matthew 2 is **Micah 5**.

The star (found in the book of nature) and Bethlehem (found in the book of God) need to be read together for the Magi to find the Christ child

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother;

The Magi fulfill this Isaiah’s prophecy by bringing their gifts to the new Jerusalem, Mary and the Christ child.

“First we must understand what God is saying to us through this epiphany. As always in his word, he is telling us something about himself... By being a tiny Child, God is saying this: with all my almighty power, genuinely might as it is, I am still as poor and humble and trusting as this Child; indeed, not just *as* this Child, for I really *am* this Child” ~ Balthasar, *You Crown the Year*, 33

and they knelt down and paid him homage.

The Magi fell down and worshipped Jesus. The word here, *proskyneō*, literally means to bow down prostrate before someone. It actually means to get down like a dog before another person. So you bow down before them prostrate. Matthew only uses this word in his Gospel to express the adoration you give to God alone (see Mt 4:9-10). From a historical viewpoint, this wouldn’t have been considered a big deal in paganism, since many kings and emperors were considered divine, like Caesar. ~ Dr. Pitre

It is said that the three wise men who came to see the Child and his Mother “fell down and worshipped”. What they worship is the epiphany, the manifestation, the shining forth of God in this poor Child. ~ Balthasar, *You Crown the Year*, 32

**Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold,
frankincense, and myrrh.**

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1st century Jews would have recognized these gifts immediately as referring to 2 OT texts: Isaiah 60, which is a prophecy of the new Jerusalem, and Psalm 72, which was read by the Jews as a prophecy of the future King, of the Messiah. And guess what the Old Testament reading and the Psalm are for this day? The first reading is Isaiah 60 and then the responsorial psalm is from Psalm 72.

Gold: royalty, kingship of Jesus (King). **Frankincense:** used in Tabernacle for worship, divinity of Jesus (Priest). **Myrrh:** burial ointment, humanity of Jesus/passion and death (Prophet) (*St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.9.2*).

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“As the Magi return home by a different way, what marvel that they have themselves become blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world (Phil 2:15).” ~ Fr. Peter John Cameron

The Magi left Bethlehem and became occasions of epiphany for others, they manifested the presence of God to all they encountered.