

Epiphany of the Lord

(Cycle ABC)

READING I: Isaiah 60:1-6

DATE: 01/02-03/2010

READING II: Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6

PLACE: Corpus Christi

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1-12*

TIME: 4:00 p.m.; 10:30 a.m.

EVENT: mass

THEME: The wisdom of the magi was not in their certain knowledge of a newborn king, but in their intuition that the star was something worth following.

I. The Star of Bethlehem

- The early seventeenth century astronomer Johannes Kepler calculated that the lights from Jupiter and Saturn converged in the night sky sometime around the birth of Christ.
- He speculated that this may have been the phenomenon that the wise men observed when they saw a star rising in the West.
- The star that we know as the star of Bethlehem led them to discover the newborn Christ.
- Kepler wasn't the only one who tried to attach a scientific explanation to what the magi witnessed.
- Comets or supernovas have all been proffered as the phenomenon behind the story we read from Matthew's gospel today.
- That is, of course, if you think that the story actually happened.

II. The Star of David

- There are other scholars who believe that the story of the magi is more rooted in symbol than in history.
- What many of us would call the Star of Bethlehem, they would call the Star of David.
- Jewish rabbis had a long tradition of believing that stars appeared at the births of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses – symbolizing God's recognition that a great leader had been born.
- The prophet Balaam, in the Book of Numbers, spoke of a star that would "advance from Jacob," which later generations interpreted as the promise of a messiah from the stock of David.
- For these scholars, the story of the magi is best understood as the Matthew's attempt to show that Jesus Christ is the hoped-for messiah – the fulfillment of which even pagan astrologers could discern from the natural world.

III. The Wisdom of the Magi

- Regardless of whether one interprets the story as historical fact or symbolic myth – or a combination of both – it still has something to teach us in the 21st Century.
- Matthew identifies the characters in his story as magi – a term that would have referred to astrologers of the ancient world.
 - Christian tradition passes on to us that there were three of these characters – probably because there were three gifts given to Jesus – and that their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.
 - They have been known as kings, as well as wise men, although Matthew never characterizes them as such.
- All Matthew tells us is that these magi witnessed a natural phenomenon that provoked them to search for something significant.
 - They probably weren't very well-versed in Jewish tradition – indeed, Matthew tells us that they didn't know from where the messiah was to hail.
 - They probably stopped in Jerusalem because it was the largest metropolis that they encountered in following the star.
- And while the star led them to Jerusalem, Matthew tells us that it was the Scripture that led them to Bethlehem.
- And that's where, I think, the wisdom of the Magi comes into play.
 - The Magi weren't wise because they knew *for sure* that there was a newborn king and where to find him.
 - The Magi were wise because their knowledge of the world gave them an *intuition* that something significant was up and that they had the *wisdom* to follow their intuition and to learn along the way.

IV. Our Faith and Intuition

- And that's where, I think, the story speaks to us today.
- We live in an age and time when certain knowledge is held up as the highest value.
 - Scientists perform experiments, doctors run tests, politicians conduct polls.
 - Everybody needs to know for sure what's going on before they're willing to take any significant action.

- The story of the Magi tells us that, while all that may be well and good, if you really want to be wise, if you really want to be part of something significant, then sometimes you just have to trust your intuition.
 - Science and facts can only tell us so much.
 - Most of us just know intuitively that there is more to life than what we can discern from mere observation.
- And so, while our knowledge of the world around us can form the foundation of what we know, sometimes we have to be willing to rely on something else.
 - On our intuition, on our sense, on our faith.
 - We have to be wise enough to know that we can't possibly know everything for sure.
- And wisdom brings together our knowledge, our experience, and our intuition of just what really is going on.
 - Just as the Magi's knowledge of the stars brought them only as far as Jerusalem, their wisdom to stop and inquire and to learn from others led them to Bethlehem.
 - And just as we undertake the journeys in our lives, we can't expect to know everything for certain, but need to be willing to rely on our intuition, our faith, and the wisdom that others can share with us.
- That's where true wisdom lies.

V. Conclusion

- So whether there really was some astronomical phenomenon around the birth of Christ or whether Matthew's story is more symbol than history, it doesn't really matter.
 - Matthew's story is true, because it teaches us about wisdom.
 - It's true, because it leads us to faith.
- As we begin the journey of a new year, let us be confident that the story of the wise men is indeed true.
 - And it may have actually happened.