

The Epiphany of the Lord, Year C

GOSPEL

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After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant king of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 'At Bethlehem in Judaea,' they told him 'for this is what the prophet wrote:

*And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,
for out of you will come a leader
who will shepherd my people Israel.'*

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. 'Go and find out all about the child,' he said 'and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward, and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

(Matthew 2:1-12)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The word *epiphany* comes from a Greek word meaning 'manifestation' or 'revelation'. In Matthew's Gospel, this episode is the first public manifestation of Jesus.
- The 'wise men' were probably magi or astrologers from Persia and represent all those who seek God with a sincere heart.
- Matthew's community is largely composed of Jewish Christians who are struggling to come to terms with the movement of the Gospel into the Gentile world. In this episode, Matthew is trying to reassure his community that all people who recognise and honour the Christ are welcomed into the new people of God.
- You will notice that the text simply says, 'some wise men'; there is no mention of a number. Over time, this has become 'three' (based on the three gifts), and the magi have become 'kings' and have even been given names!
- You will also notice that Matthew has Jesus being born in a house, presumably at home in Joseph's house.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The key to understanding this highly symbolic gospel lies in the various actors' response to Jesus. The wise men are not of the house of Israel; they are foreigners from the east. And yet it is they who recognise the signs and embark on a journey to find the newborn king and worship him. The opposite response comes from the very people who should know better. Herod, the Jewish political leader, and the chief priests and scribes, the interpreters of Scripture and religious leaders, have not seen what is there before them, and when they do come to understand, they seek only to do harm to Jesus. This is the first hint of the harm that will ultimately come to him from the same characters much later in his life. They are not open to the revelation of God in this child.

Imagine how disappointed the wise men might have felt when they found a poor child born in a simple house instead of a mighty king. But they are open to the revelation of God and bow down before him. The expensive gifts of the wise men are highly symbolic: gold was presented to kings; frankincense was offered to God; and myrrh was used in anointing for burial. Thus they refer to the kingship of Jesus, his divinity and his salvific death.

- In what ways do you recognise the divine in the ordinary?
- How long have you been on your journey and how much progress have you made?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What is leading you on your journey towards Jesus?
- What gifts do you bring to Jesus?
- Spend time this week reflecting on the new road you have taken? How has it changed the way you act or think? In what ways do you encounter the Christ child in your life?
- 'The sight of the star filled them with delight.' Share your own stories of times of pure delight in your life.
- Use today's collect as your prayer this week:

*May the splendor of your majesty, O Lord, we pray,
shed its light upon our hearts,
that we may pass through the shadows of this world
and reach the brightness of our eternal home.*

