

The Epiphany of the Lord

Gospel text (Mt 2:1-12): When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.”

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

“(…) Greatly troubled and all Jerusalem with him (…). They saw the child with Mary his mother”

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Today, we see in three mysterious gentiles what nervous Jerusalem did not: the manifestation of God’s merciful love for all humanity. Persian culture, astronomy, and gifts garner most of our attention today, but Benedict XVI also notes a puzzle: mention of Joseph is “strikingly absent” from Matthew’s description of the Magi’s actual arrival (cf. Mt 2,11). He admits, «I have yet to find a completely convincing explanation».

Yet, why the surprise? Joseph needed to maintain his family in Bethlehem in the months before the Magi arrived. Far from Nazareth's workshop, he travelled to where the work was: damaged fences and corrals, or new building projects. It was not strange for Joseph to be elsewhere when the Magi arrived--it's even possible he never met them at all. Joseph's work is as crucial to the infancy narrative as his presence at home with Mary and Jesus.

Pope Leo XIV made this point, referring to the blacksmith, the innkeepers, the washerwomen, etc in the Vatican's crèche scene: «They seem detached from the central event, but this is not the case: in reality, each one participates in it just as they are, staying in their place and doing what they have to do, their job (...). This can also be true for us in our working days: each one of us carries out our task and we praise God precisely by doing it well, with commitment».

Let's resolve to give the Christ child the gift of our work this year. Let's be grateful for the sacrifice of those whose work requires them to leave their families and serve us on holidays. And, if Joseph is missing from a manger scene, let's know where to find him: among the modern day laborers who congregate in the usual places with the uncertain mission of obtaining their families' daily bread. They await our appreciation and compassion —not Jerusalem's fear, nor Herod's vitriol.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “Let the fullness of the nations enter into the family of the patriarchs (...). In the three Magi let all people worship the Author of the universe.” (Saint Leo the Great)
- “The mystery of Christmas shines on the earth spreading in concentric circles: the Holy Family of Nazareth, the shepherds of Bethlehem and, finally, the Magi who are the first-fruits of the pagan peoples.” (Benedict XVI)
- “The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Savior of the world. The great feast of Epiphany celebrates the adoration of Jesus by the wise men (magi) from the East, together with his baptism in the Jordan and the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee (Mt 2:1). In the magi, representatives of the neighboring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation (...).” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, Nº 528)

Other comments

“Entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage”

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Today, the prophet Isaiah encourages us: "Arise! Shine, for your light has come, the glory of the LORD has dawned upon you." (Is 60:1). The light the prophet has seen is the star, which the Three Wise Men see in the East, like many other men. The Magi discover its meaning. Others consider it as something admirable, but that does not affect them. And, so, they do not react. The Three Wise Men realize the fact that, with the star, God is sending them an important message for which it is worthwhile leaving comfort and safety to take on the risks of an uncertain journey: the hope of finding the King leads them to follow the star, which the prophets had spoken of and which the people of Israel had been waiting for centuries.

They arrive in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. They are sure that there they will be shown where the King has been born. Indeed, they will be told: "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet" (Mt 2:5). The news of the arrival of the Magi and their inquiry spreads around Jerusalem in a very short time: Jerusalem was, at that time, a small city and the presence of the Magi with their escort must have been noticed by all its inhabitants, thus "When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (Mt 2:3), the Gospel tells us.

Jesus Christ crosses the paths of the lives of many people who are not interested in Him. A little effort would have changed their lives; they would have found the King of Joy and Peace. This requires a willingness to look for Him, to move around, to ask without losing heart —like the Three Wise Men— to leave our comfort, our routine. It requires an effort to appreciate the immense value of finding Christ. If we do not find Him, we have not found anything in life, because only He is the Savior: finding Jesus is to find the Path that leads us to know the Truth that gives us Life. And without Him, nothing is worthwhile.