

Epiphany of the Lord – 2022C

**We three kings of Orient are,
Bearing gifts we traverse afar....**

**O, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.**

Picturesque, delightful, magical: such is this feast of the Epiphany.

I suspect that, next to the manger scene, nothing has caught the Christian imagination more than the Magi story. It's not just that they are so colorful that each succeeding generation has had to add more and more hues; it's not just that they are so mysterious that we simply had to give them gorgeous names (Melchior, Balthazar, Caspar); it's not just that they are so wonderfully exotic that we had to count their number as a mystical three; it's not just that, since they come from a faraway land, we had to make them—what else!—kings. It's not just all of these things that have captivated us. Rather, deep down, whether we realize it or not, we instinctively know that the Magi story is our story, and that's why we are mesmerized by it. The Magi, basically, are you and I and everyone born into this world. Their timeless tale follows the human storylines of everyone.

Consider. First, for every human being, from the very moment of birth, there is a call to answer, a vision to follow, a goal to be reached, an ideal to be fulfilled. In a very real sense, we are all born with a vocation. It may be to become a mechanic, an engineer, a teacher, a dancer, whatever. The goal may be to find one's true love, the jewel in the eye of the idol, the Emerald City for Dorothy Gale, the Holy Grail for Indiana Jones, the sorcerer's stone for Harry Potter, the King of the Jews for the three searchers. We are

all born with a goal to be reached. To put it another way, beneath all these symbols, there is, simply put, the human ache for God. We share this with the Magi.

Second, the Magi, in order to seek their goal, must embark on a journey and take on the risks of doing so. Sooner or later, we modern Magi also have to leave the security of what we know to venture out into the unknown.

Like it or not, from birth to death life is one inevitable journey with very discernible and identifiable stages, from infancy to adolescence to adulthood. Each stage has its set of risks. Shall the child cling to the comfort and security of the mother or take on the risks of the neighbourhood and school? Can the adolescent leave his or her self-absorption and run the risk of trusting others? Can the adult pull back from an all-absorbing money making career and take the time to foster fidelity and intimacy with another? There are risks all up and down the line.

Third, on a journey, any journey, there are always obstacles. For the Magi, there was Herod, a wicked king who sweet-talked a lie to them: "Please, go find this adorable child you are seeking and by all means come back and tell me. There is nothing more I want than to fall at those infant feet and adore him." And Herod, dreaming of murder, wiped away a sentimental tear.

For us, the obstacles to our true goal are the sweet-talking lies of commercials that try to convince us we are what we purchase and what we purchase makes us what we are; it's the rationalistic hucksters in our universities or on our TVs who preach that we have no goal, that all is here and now. There is no journey. All is illusion. There's only a straight line to oblivion, so make the most of it.

Other obstacles are the stimulating highs of drugs; the idolatry of celebrity; the lure of exciting, uncommitted sex; and the constant din provided by the ubiquitous noisemakers—their loud music and

machines, their constant hectoring to buy, their heady success in teaching us to equate busyness with importance. "You must be terribly busy" has become a sort of compliment, a hint that we are important and indispensable. "Always on the go" and "There's never enough time" are badges we wearily but proudly wear. The noisemakers smile. In no way do they want us to flirt with silence and solitude, wherein we might discover our true selves and sense the real goal of our journey. Such obstacles are, if you will, the spiritual steroids that puff-up our self-importance, inflate our desire for power, and make us blind to the cry of the poor.

But there are helps, too. For the Magi, help came in the form of an angel who warned them not to return to oily Herod but to take another path. For us, there are our moral heroes and models—hopefully, beginning with our parents—who have taught us by word and example to take another path, the path of Jesus, and who have taught us who we really are: God-imaged folk made to know, love, and serve God in this life and be happy with God forever in heaven. In the best scenario, our parents are mightily aided by a faith community, the inspiration of the saints, common and faithful worship, prayer, and the sacraments.

Finally, of course, there is the end of the journey. For the Magi it was to engage the sacred, to look into the face of Christ and, falling down, to offer him their gifts and worship him. It is the same for us: to offer our gifts and talents and to minister to Jesus—which, in fact, we do whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the freezing because when we do these things for the very least of humanity, we are doing them for Jesus himself.

So there we are:

Beginning, middle, end.

Birth, growth, death.

Risk, obstacles, help.

The face of God.

It's all there in today's gospel.

That's why the story of the Magi resonates so well with us. Deep in our subconscious, you see, we recognize ourselves; we are the Magi still en route. That recognition forces us to examine where we are right now on our spiritual journey, what risks we have taken for the sake of the kingdom of God, or even, perhaps, how our quest for God has been replaced by false idols or sidetracked by modern-day Herods. We are made to pause in our life journey, face up to our Herods and ask: is it possible that we have gained the whole world at the expense of our own souls? If so, we pray:

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