

Epiphany of the Lord

Some years ago we started celebrating the feast of the Epiphany on the Sunday nearest January 6 rather on the day itself. "Epiphany" means that the divinity of Jesus was manifested to the world. During Advent we remember the promises that foretell the coming of the Messiah. At Christmas we celebrate that coming in history. On Epiphany we stand in awe of the revealed mystery of the Word made flesh.²

Isaiah 60:1-6

This reading stresses the manifestation of God's glory and the universal scope of salvation. It is a hymn of Jerusalem restored, a vision meant to encourage those who had returned from the exile in Babylon, who were struggling to rebuild the temple, the city and the nation.³

¹Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. Just as the Magi followed a star, Jerusalem is a light for all people. Whenever the phrase, "the glory of the Lord shines" appears, (the Mosaic Tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, and descriptions of messianic Jerusalem) it always signals an extraordinary illumination, as though God were not wrapping splendor around Jerusalem but rather, by his presence within the city, radiating a dazzling light.⁴ On the other hand, Jerusalem represents the Church for at every step in her history, she is the object of this exhortation: Rise up in splendor....Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth....Nations shall walk by your light. This light is Jesus Christ Himself.⁵

²See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory. The light of the star that guides the Wise Men symbolizes the Light that Christ casts by his coming into the dark of this world.¹

³Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. This prophecy comes true with the Magi but it also refers to Christ the "Light of the World." In Rev. 22:16, St. John closes the revelation with the words: "It is I, Jesus Christ, who have sent my angel to give you this testimony about the churches. I am the Root and Offspring of David, the Morning Star shining bright." He is both the Babe who lies below and the star that shines above. The nations shall walk by your light" means that there is hope for the Gentiles too.¹

⁴Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses. The pilgrimage described here comes from all corners of the earth. It is made up of people who were scattered throughout the known world and not just those exiled in Babylon.⁶

⁵Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Those pilgrims coming from the west come by sea bearing the sort of goods normally transported by sea. Those from the east will travel in caravans bringing precious commodities typical of the area—silver, gold, etc.⁶ The riches of the sea and the wealth of nations were promised to Jerusalem.

⁶Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord. Midian,

Ephah, and Sheba are people of the Arabian peninsula, descendants of Abraham who now return to share their ancient patrimony.³ Two of the gifts brought to the Child by the Magi are mentioned here: gold, which prophesies Jesus' Kingship, and the frankincense, which is a sign of his divinity and his High-priesthood. Isaiah doesn't mention the myrrh, perhaps because the Spirit, Who inspired him to write, didn't wish the prophecy of Jesus' death, which that ointment represents, to be interposed at this time of great rejoicing over the coming of this King.¹

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

The inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation was one of the earliest struggles faced by the church, which was made up mostly of Jews. It took some years before this aspect of Christ's mission was fully understood and the Church realized that God's promise to Israel had been a universal promise from the beginning.² The first covenants were, after all, universal. The covenants with Adam at creation, and with Noah after the flood, were intended to extend to the whole of the human family. It is not until Abraham that God chooses one people to mediate His covenantal love to the rest of mankind. At every step of salvation history, God's overtures to His creatures are frustrated by human sin. Finally, He sends His only Son who can act as the perfect Mediator between God and man because Jesus IS both God and man.¹

Brothers and sisters:

2You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit, Paul wrote this letter while in prison awaiting trial before Nero. He reflects on his mission to the Gentiles (those who do not believe in the Jewish faith).⁷ God's favor was shown to Paul not for himself but for others.⁴ By "stewardship" he means the administrative tasks of a servant in charge of the household for his master. Paul is a steward of divine mysteries chosen to manage the household affairs of the Church.⁸

3anamely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation. Paul was on a journey to Damascus to persecute disciples of the Lord when suddenly a light flashed around him that seemed to come from heaven. He was challenged by the Lord to stop persecuting him and to come follow him. Paul did and his whole life changed. He uses that conversion experience to bring others to the Lord.⁷ The "mystery" or secret plan that God revealed to Paul is that He had a plan to save us despite ourselves: To make those of us who were not Jews part of the covenant family and to overcome the covenant failures of the Jewish people by the covenant faithfulness of the Jewish Jesus!¹

5It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: Paul claimed his place as an apostle because he was an eyewitness to the Lord during his conversion experience.⁷ What he means here is that God's plan of salvation for all was revealed to the foundational leaders of the church. This is perhaps a reference to events like Peter's vision in Acts that led him to accept Gentiles in the church and the Council of Jerusalem that ratified Paul's position.³

6that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. While the Old Testament revealed that the nations would be blessed, it remained unclear how this would take place. It was also not clear before the proclamation of the gospel whether the Gentiles would be saved on an equal footing with

Israel.⁸ However, the three terms: “coheirs,” “members” and “sharers” are all meant to stress the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the new People of God.³

Matthew 2:1-12

1When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, Bethlehem is a small village about 5 miles south of Jerusalem.¹¹ The present Church of the Nativity is built on the site of the church built by St. Helena, the mother of Constantine about 327 A.D. It is interesting that this is considered the best authenticated of all the holy places in Palestine.⁹ Even though the pagans took over the area and the Christians were persecuted, Origen, one of the Church Fathers from Egypt wrote in the early third century: “In Bethlehem you are shown the cave where he was born, and within the cave, the manger where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes. These things, which they show you are recognized in the district.” When the first Crusade arrived in the midst of the Muslims who had ruled for over 500 years, Bethlehem welcomed the Crusaders as deliverers, for it had remained almost entirely a Christian town!¹⁰ The door to the Church of the Nativity is very short and narrow so that none may enter on horseback and all must bow as they enter the birthplace of the King of Kings. Most churches were destroyed during the Persian invasion of the 7th century A.D., but the Church of the Nativity was saved from desecration because of the mosaic then on the façade of the church. The three Wise Men who came to pay homage to the baby Jesus were depicted wearing Persian clothing; it is believed that this stopped the Persians from destroying the church.⁹ The name “Bethlehem” means “house of bread” which gives us food for thought when we consider the “Bread of Life” who was born there.⁷ Bethlehem was the “city of David”. As the new Davidic king, Jesus is born in the hometown of David and his family.¹¹ Herod was the ruler of Palestine. He was extremely harsh and inflexible and enjoyed little favor with the Jews since he remained loyal to the Roman emperor.¹¹ “Magi” were found only in Iran (Persia) which would suggest that at least one of the “kings” was from there. These men were the first Gentiles to recognize the kingship of Jesus.¹⁰

2“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” The mention of the star recalls OT prophecy about the Messiah in Num 24:17 when Balaam, who was himself a Magi from the East, was hired by the wicked King of Moab to use his magic to curse Israel. But every time Balaam attempted to curse Israel, he uttered a blessing instead. The Spirit of God came upon Balaam and, in blessing Israel, he prophesied that one day a star would come out of Israel signifying the coming of a great king as symbolized by a scepter: “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” Many believe that the prophecy of Balaam was kept by his descendants—fellow Magi—and, eventually it was passed on to the three who visited Jesus.¹

3When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Herod saw a potential Messiah-King as a dangerous rival to his own worldly power.¹² Herod was an Edomite and he was troubled because he knew the passage from Numbers about Balaam

and the following verse that foretold disaster for his family when it says: “Edom shall be dispossessed.”¹¹

⁴Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: Matthew’s purpose in telling this story is to show that every prophecy and promise of old has come to fulfillment in Christ.²

⁶“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.” This is a combined citation of Micah 5:2 and 2 Sam. 5:2. Both the birthplace and kingship of the Messiah are central. According to Micah, the greatness of Bethlehem will far outweigh its small size because of the great king who will arise there. The reference to 2 Sam also has a royal context, narrating David’s covenant of kingship with the 12 tribes of Israel. The mention of these OT texts by the “chief priests and scribes” indicates their close association with messianic expectations during NT times.¹¹

⁷Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance.

⁸He 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.”

⁹After 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. No guidance of the star is suggested for the journey prior to the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem; but now it leads them not only to the town but to the very house.⁴

¹⁰They were overjoyed at seeing the star,

¹¹and 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. The setting of a “house” suggests that this event took place sometime after Jesus’ presence in the manger and the earlier visit of the shepherds mentioned in Luke. In the ancient Near East it was customary to offer gifts to a king. We mentioned gold and frankincense as they were in the prophecy of Isaiah. Myrrh was an anointing oil used to consecrate Levitical priests and was also a burial ointment. St. Irenaeus suggests that “Gold, a symbol of royalty, represents the kingship of Jesus. Frankincense, used in the worship of God, points to his divinity. Myrrh, a burial ointment, signifies the humanity of Christ, especially in his Passion and death.”¹¹ The Council of Trent expressly quotes this passage when it underlines the veneration that ought to be given to Christ in the Eucharist: “The faithful of Christ venerate this most holy sacrament with the worship... which is due to the true God. For in this sacrament we believe that the same God is present whom the eternal Father brought into the world, saying of him, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’. It is the same God whom the Magi fell down and worshipped and, finally, the same God whom the Apostles adored in Galilee.”¹²

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way. The theme of the story is not only the royal messiahship of Jesus but also

the adoration of him by the Gentiles first, and the Jews, even when informed of the birth, remain indifferent.⁴ Dorothy Day reflected on this scripture and thanked God for the few who made up for the neglect of the crowd.

Some of the material for this commentary comes from: (1) Commentary Notes of Tim Grey, (2) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Aelred R. Rosser, (3) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (4) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (5) "Saint Joseph Commentary On The Sunday Readings" by Achille Degeest, (6) "The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets," (7) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (8) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letters of St. Paul to the Galatians & Ephesians", (9) "A Pilgrim In The Holy Land" by Fr. Godfrey O.F.M., (10) "The Founding of Christendom" by Warren H. Carroll, (11) "The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew," and (12) "The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew."

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.