

Feast of the Epiphany

Jan. 6, 2008

Introduction:

Homily.

Epiphany is a strange word for us, based on the Greek word for *manifestation* or *showing*. The early Churches of the East saw Jesus' life beginning with three great epiphanies, or manifestations: the one we celebrate today when Jesus reveals himself to the Gentile magi; his manifestation at his baptism some thirty years later, which we will celebrate next Sunday; and his manifestation at the marriage feast of Cana when he performed his first miracle, turning water into wine.

In all three of these events, Jesus is revealed as both the promised Messiah, the long-awaited descendant of King David who would establish an eternal kingdom; and as the revelation of the glory of God, the one who would bring Salvation, not just to the Judeans, but to all the peoples of the earth.

Our scripture readings for today are rich, every detail being significant. Our first reading from Third Isaiah speaks of the return from exile in Babylon as the messianic time when the glory of the Lord will be manifest, and all peoples of the earth will come to Jerusalem to encounter God's glory.

Many details from this passage from Isaiah are reflected in today's gospel: light suggests the miraculous star that led the magi. Gifts of gold and frankincense are mentioned.

Other details from Isaiah have colored the way we picture the event. It is here, and not in the gospel, that kings and camels are mentioned.

But Isaiah foretells the great truth: that the Messiah would come, revealing the glory of God, and bringing salvation, for the Jewish people and for all the peoples of the world.

The Letter to the Ephesians, our second reading, highlights that the mystery has been revealed, made manifest: that God's salvation is also for Gentiles; we are co-heirs to God's kingdom.

Matthew is the only gospel writer to preserve for us the marvelous story of this first epiphany. He emphasizes that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He mentions four times that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David, because the Messiah was to be a descendant of David. Herod asks all the chief priests and scribes where the Christ, the Greek word for Messiah, is to be born. And the magi refer to the star as "his star"; only the greatest of people have their births announced by a special star.

Scripture scholars point out that even the three gifts are truly significant: gold, a gift for a king; frankincense, a gift for God; and myrrh, a gift for one who suffers.

And the magi, once they find him whom they seek, prostrate themselves—lie on their faces, and offered him homage.

The glory of God, the Messiah, is present. And these foreigners, gentiles, seek him at great personal cost and risk, and find him.

For all of us who are Gentiles, not Jews, this is our great feast, and the magi are models for us. The magi were wise people. In spite of all they knew, they were willing to set out on a quest, following a star. They knew that they were still lacking the fullness of truth and wisdom, and they were willing to risk

everything to attain it. They had the wisdom to believe that an infant in Bethlehem was the fullness of truth

It is only when we realize that we do not yet have the fullness of truth, that we need to be saved, that we need God, that we will be willing to do what is necessary to find him, and to be able to recognize him. If we seek him, not only will we find him, but he will find us. And we will come to know the glory of the Lord.