

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Matt 2:2

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.



Gospel

Matt 2:1-12; L20ABC

**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 Christ
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.”***

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Reflecting on the Gospel

Today's gospel gives us the classic and familiar story of the “visit of the magi. We have heard it so often that we may sometimes miss critical, and perhaps not so critical, elements in the story. For example, we are never told how many wise men, or magi, there are. We also note that verse 1 states simply that Jesus was born. Not until several verses later do we learn about Herod ascertaining from the magi when the star appeared. He then sent them to search for the *child* (not infant). That one word, child, rather than infant, is a clue that the star had appeared sometime earlier. And then we learn that Herod ordered male children up to the age of two to be killed. So it seems Matthew had in mind that the visit of the magi happened while Jesus was a child about the age of two.

In our own minds we have likely harmonized Matthew's nativity account with Luke's so that we place Luke's angels together with Matthew's magi in the crèche! But in Matthew's telling, there is no census that brings the family from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no manger, no animals, and no shepherds. According to Matthew Jesus was born at home in Bethlehem, where Joseph and Mary lived. We may be forgiven for combining Matthew and Luke's versions of the stories. Even the nativity scenes in our home have harmonized these narratives too!

Ultimately, the importance of what Matthew and Luke are telling us rests not in details about how the family moved from Bethlehem to Nazareth, or whether Jesus was born in a home or a stable. Instead, Matthew provides a theological insight into the person of Jesus and the activity of God. The magi are not Jews. They are Gentiles. They worship Jesus. As such they prefigure the Gentile mission that the risen Jesus will inaugurate in the closing verses of this gospel (Matt 28:16-20). That is to say, Matthew “bookends” his gospel with a story of Gentiles (the magi) coming to worship Jesus at the beginning, and the risen Jesus' own command to his disciples to “make disciples of all nations [Gentiles], baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (NABRE). Ultimately the Gentiles are coheirs with the Jews of the promises of God. We cannot limit God's mercy. It knows no bounds, and includes all!

Living the Paschal Mystery

It's likely been some time since we've put away our Christmas decorations. Or if we are purists, our decorations have remained up until today. The very timing of the Epiphany, or the visit of the magi, tells us that we've moved on from the Christmas event. We are no longer in the manger. Our lives have begun to go in other directions. The infant is growing up to be a child and is walking. Ordinary Time quickly approaches. And now we have a visit from strangers who have come to see the cause of our celebration. We call to mind that time, and perhaps we relive some of its joy. But as with the magi, danger unfortunately lurks. They go home another way, aware of skulking peril. This too, along with Herod's massacre of the innocents, foreshadows the violent end that Jesus will ultimately face.

And so living the paschal mystery is a combination of joy in new life with an awareness of death. But death will be overcome by life. How many of us might prefer to dwell with the baby Jesus in a manger, or sit with the Holy Family when all is calm and peaceful. But that is not the life we lead. Though these periods of calm, serenity, and joy punctuate our lives, we are aware of the pressing journey. We navigate our paths aware of danger and peril. We rely on God and our own sense to steer us toward safety, all the while aware of a specter of malevolence. For we, like the Gentile magi, worship a child who will face a violent end, only to be raised to new life. It is the paschal mystery.

Focusing the Gospel

Matt 2:1-12

Matthew’s story of the magi serves as a preview of what is to come as his gospel narrative unfolds. First, the reactions of the various parties to the birth of Jesus mirror the effects Jesus’ teaching will have on those who hear it. Herod is threatened by the Jesus of the poor who comes to overturn the powerful and rich. The chief priests and scribes greet with haughty indifference the news of the birth of the Jesus who comes to give new life and meaning to their rituals and laws. But the magi—nonbelievers in the eyes of Israel—possess the humility of faith and the openness of mind and heart to seek and welcome the Jesus who will establish the second covenant between God and the new Israel.

Second, the gifts of the astrologers indicate the principal dimensions of Jesus’ life and mission: *Gold* is a gift fitting for a king, a ruler, one with power and authority; gold was a symbol of divinity. This Child comes to transform our perspective of wealth to treasure again the things of God—compassion, forgiveness, and peace are the coin of the realm of the newborn King. *Frankincense* comes from a small tree found only in Arabia and parts of northern Africa. The hardened resin of the plant was used as a medicine for many ailments: to stop bleeding and to heal wounds; as an antidote for poisons and as a salve for bruises, ulcerations, and paralyzed limbs. This Child comes to restore and heal not just the physical ailments of those he will encounter in his gospel journey, but to heal us of our fears and doubts, to bridge the chasms that separate us from one another and from God. *Myrrh* was an expensive extract from the resin of the myrrh tree. It, too, was used as a medicine but, more significantly, it was used in embalming the dead. Only royalty and the very wealthy were embalmed; myrrh, therefore, was a gift reserved for kings. This Child comes to recreate us in the life of God: his death will be the defeat of death, his cross will be his—and our—glory. The three gifts of the magi are a gospel in themselves. They honor the Child who is himself a gift from the God whose love is beyond our comprehension, whose goodness knows neither limit nor condition.

Focusing the First Reading

Isa 60:1-6

The exiled Jews are returning to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild their nation and their way of life. But Isaiah envisions more for the city than just the rebuilding of its capital: Jerusalem will be a light for all nations, a gathering place where not only returning Jews but all peoples of every land will be welcomed, a city of joy that mirrors for all the world the justice and peace of God.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13 (11)

This royal psalm envisions the king as the vicar of God, the embodiment of the justice and peace of the Creator, the premier leader of the world, to whom all nations and peoples come for wisdom and guidance. In the light of today’s feast, this “divine kingship” is perfected in the Child born of Mary. (Could Matthew have had Psalm 72 in mind in composing his story of the magi?)

Focusing the Second Reading

Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6

This letter is a synthesis of Paul’s theology of the church. In today’s reading, the apostle writes that the church transcends national and cultural identities: in Christ, Jew and Gentile form one body and share equally in the promise of the resurrection.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

What “epiphanies” have you experienced in your life that have been most revealing and instructive?

What star have you followed that led you to discovering the “holy”? What star have you followed that led you to emptiness and disappointment?

**The Epiphany of the Lord,
January 8, 2017**

Gospel (cont.)

Matt 2:1-12; L20ABC

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.