

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Matt 2:2

R¹. Alleluia, alleluia.

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

R². 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 Je-
rusalem, 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.”*



Reflecting on the Gospel

The feast of the Epiphany is celebrated in many cultures and oftentimes more prominently than Christmas! At a time when many homes have taken down decorations and put away special dishes from the season, we are reminded that there are still celebrations to be had. This story of the visit from the magi is unique to Matthew’s gospel and when read on its own terms it can be especially revealing. Often, however, we read this gospel with preconceived notions. For example, the text doesn’t say how many magi there were but because they

gave three gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) artists, preachers, and homilists through the centuries talk about there being three kings. Aside from fulfilling Scripture (e.g., Isa 60:6), the gifts are symbolic, as they were given to kings or divinities in antiquity. Gold is a precious element representing kingship, frankincense a perfume, and myrrh a costly balm or ointment.

And this leads to the term, “king,” which is not used in the gospel text. Instead, the term is “magi,” which designated the Persian (modern-day Iran) priestly caste. Thus, Matthew foreshadows the postresurrection mission to the Gentiles by showing Gentiles (Persians) coming to worship the child Jesus. Ultimately, this is a story about who Jesus is and what his mission will be.

It is also significant that the magi worship the *child* Jesus. Matthew does not use the term infant

here for Jesus is no longer an infant. And it’s clear from the story that Mary is at her *house*, not in a manger as Luke would have it. Again, when we read these stories on their own terms without importing “what we know” from other stories, a different picture emerges, and that can be a picture that conforms more closely to the theology that the evangelist wanted to impart.

In the story following today’s gospel, Matthew tells us of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt to escape Herod slaughtering all the male children in Bethlehem up to two years old (Matt 2:16; NABRE). This is a clear indication that the magi visited the home about two years after the birth of Jesus. And the point here is theological. Jesus is brought to Egypt so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Matt 2:15; Hos 11:1; NABRE). So in today’s gospel reading we see the mission to the Gentiles and the universal scope of salvation foreshadowed by the visit of the magi to worship the child Jesus. Salvation knows no bounds. This is a cause for celebration indeed!

Living the Paschal Mystery

Both children and adults enjoy giving and receiving gifts: it seems to be part of the human condition. For the receiver there is an element of surprise. What could it be? Perhaps some anticipation comes with opening the gift and there is a sense of wonder. For the giver there is the joy of generosity, in seeing the look on the face of the one who receives. There is the joy that comes in simply thinking of the other and providing something for the other not because it was earned, but instead because it comes from a place of generosity. Stories of gifts given and received are numerous in the Scriptures, antiquity, and history. They come to be part of family and friend lore as well. It’s likely that many of us can

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quickly call to mind gifts that we've given or received. The gifts given by the magi in some way represent or symbolize the best physical objects that humanity has to offer. And Jesus is the best that God has to offer. By the conclusion of the gospel story humanity will have executed Jesus, the gift of God, only to have God raise him up from the dead. This expression of the paschal mystery guides our thoughts today when the magi present the best of human intentions.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: They were overjoyed at seeing the star.

To the point: In today's gospel creation itself proclaims the birth of Jesus to the magi, the kings who are strangers in the land of Israel. They follow the star in their search for this newborn king, and when they find him not in the palace in Jerusalem but in a humble home in Bethlehem, they worship this baby and offer him kingly gifts. The magi respond with joy to the revelation of Jesus, unlike Herod who is "greatly troubled." Unable to receive the gift of Jesus or to offer Jesus the gift of himself he remains hostage to his greed and lust for power.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first and second readings: For the first time in our Advent and Christmas gospel readings the gift of Jesus is extended to the Gentiles. This is foreshadowed in Isaiah's prophecy to the people of Israel, "Nations shall walk by your light." Jesus, the light of the world, born to the Jewish people, invites everyone, Jews and Gentiles, into the light of God's love. The apostle Paul proclaims in his letter to the Ephesians, "[T]he Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, / and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

to experience: Paul proclaims the radical inclusivity of God's kingdom ushered in by the mystery of the incarnation: God become human, longing to draw all of creation to God-self. How do we practice this radical inclusivity in our own lives? How might we not only welcome the stranger but also reverence the stranger's wisdom, understanding, and right to be among us?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king of Israel, asking that entire world might receive blessing through him as a representative of God's divine judgment and justice. In the gospel we see this prayer brought fulfillment. The psalmist prays, "All kings shall pay him homage, / all nations shall serve him." In the gospel the magi (representatives from foreign lands) come and do just this—prostrate themselves before Jesus and do him honor. The psalmist proclaims that this king of great glory who rules all nations concerned with the poor and the lowly, and then in the gospel we see that king is in fact one of the poor and the lowly. Jesus is not found in a lavish palace with guards, wealth, and an army at his command. He is a defenseless born to commoners.

to psalmist preparation: Today's feast marks the opening of the cover to all the people of the world. Just as the magi welcomed the sight of the star with great joy, we, too, are invited to joyfully accept this humble child as our king and Lord. The psalm you proclaim today lauds the glory of this king also extolls his compassion to the poor and the oppressed. How might you claim God's glory and compassion within the acts of your daily life?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

The prophet Isaiah tells us, "Rise up . . . ! Your light has come." When have you had the opportunity to be a light for others?

The magi follow a star that leads them to Jesus, God with us. In your life, how has creation helped you to know God?

The magi, strangers from a foreign country, travel to the land of Israel and are welcomed into Jesus' home. In your life of faith when have you encountered different cultures and/or religions? How has this experience changed your understanding of God and humanity?

The Epiphany of the Lord, January 6, 2019

Gospel (cont.)

Matt 2:1-12; L20ABC

When 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.