

**A Light to Lighten the Gentiles**

St. Matthew 2:1-12

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January 6, 2009 – The Epiphany

In the Ancient Church the Epiphany of Our Lord was originally what Christmas, or the Nativity is for us today. It was the starting point of the story of Redemption. The Eastern Church didn't emphasize the birth of Christ the way we now do.

Instead they considered Jesus' baptism to be the beginning of the story. Epiphany means revelation or manifestation. It was at his baptism that Jesus was first unveiled as the Redeemer. God the Father declared that day: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The Holy Spirit descended on a man that most people just saw as a humble carpenter from Nazareth and anointed him prophet, priest, and king. That was the moment where we see the assurance that Jesus was divinely equipped for his ministry and that's the starting point of his public ministry on earth.

When we in the Western Church first started celebrating the Epiphany we were already celebrating Christmas as the beginning of Christ's story, so we adapted the Epiphany to fit into our Western church year. What the Church celebrates on December 25<sup>th</sup> is something that really happened in Israel. The people who received the baby as the Messiah they'd been waiting for were the Jews – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and lots of others who encountered him during his ministry. But the Western Church wasn't Jewish – it was a mostly Gentile church – so the Epiphany became a sort of Christmas of the Gentiles. A feast to celebrate and emphasize that Christ came not only for the Jews, but for all people. The story of the kings from the East was chosen as the main lesson because it tells the story of the first revealing of Christ as the Saviour – not just of the Jews, but of all peoples and nations.

The prophet Isaiah wrote to the Israelites, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising"

(Isaiah 60:1, 3) But Isaiah gets even more specific: "All they from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall show forth the praise of the Lord." God calls to his people: "Arise and shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." It takes us right into the Gospel lesson where we see the kings from the East: "We have seen his star in the East; and we have come to worship him." In our collect we prayed, "O God, who by the leading of star manifested your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles..." In the Holy Gospel the Gentiles come. We read there in verses 1-2:

**When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."**

I know that we're used to seeing the three magi gathered around the stable with the shepherds under our Christmas trees, but in reality these Gentile magi came to worship quite a bit later – not less than two months later, but possibly as long as a couple of years. The Bible doesn't say how these men came to Bethlehem. It simply tells us that they were astronomers from the east – probably Persia or Babylon – who followed the star so that they could worship the newborn King.

They came to worship the Lord Jesus. These Gentiles knew that he was King of the Jews – the one promised to the Jews and expected by them, the Comforter and helper of Israel. But these men from another country came to worship him as if he were their own king. When they saw him, they saw their Lord, their King – they saw a kingdom that wasn't confined to Israel. They saw a king who could save the Gentiles too.

Every time I read this story I wonder how and why these men made the King of the Jews their own king. We read: "We have seen his star in the East." Later in the story we read that God warned them not to return to Herod. This is one of those times when we see the hand of God at work. God was with these men. The same God who had given so many revelations to the Jews about their coming saviour also gave some kind of revelation to Gentiles. He sent angels to the shepherds and he sent a star to these kings of the East.

I think that many Gentiles like these men knew about Israel and were probably at least a little familiar with the prophecies about her. If you remember, Balaam, the prophet who spoke about the star that would rise out of Jacob and the sceptre of Judah, was an Easterner. The Jews were also captives in Babylon for 70 years – and many stayed there never to return to their homeland. I don't think it's a stretch to assume that the magi were looking in faith for the promises made to Israel to come true. The star that God placed in the sky would have been the perfect thing for them to see – a symbol prophesied by one of their own hundreds of years earlier that God knew they would remember. When they saw the star they knew that the Promised One had been born.

When God announced the birth of Jesus in the East, he showed that Jesus had come not just for the Jews, but for *all* people. He was declaring that faith in Jesus Christ is *the* religion that he meant for the whole world. There shouldn't be any other religion in existence. But even after 2000 years we see false religions everywhere. It's been 2000 years and the world is still full of darkness. We live in a world where the light of truth shines, but where it seems that most people prefer to crawl back into the darkness of the caves that Jesus came to rescue us from.

Truth is the first essential, and the truth about God and his relation to man is something that sinful people simply aren't willing to acknowledge. We try to find all sorts of ways around it. Man has invented all sorts of religions and philosophies to try to fix what we know deep, down, inside is wrong with us – but none of them is based on that critical truth. To be true, a religion has to have been revealed by God himself. That's what we have in Jesus Christ. We have it here. This is what was revealed to the magi when God called them to go on a journey to Bethlehem to worship the King of the Jews.

But that wasn't the only time that God declared faith in Jesus Christ as the true religion. It was that from the very beginning. There was a time when God had the entire human race in front of him. He taught this religion, this faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man to them. In the garden of Eden he told Adam and Eve how the seed of the woman would rise up and crush the serpent's head. God pointed Adam and Eve and all their descendants to Christ. They didn't

know his name, but faith in him was to be their religion.

God has never recognised any other religion – in fact he’s condemned every other belief system. To him the greatest offence has always been that men and women ignore and pervert whatever knowledge they have of God and reject true faith in the one he sent. As punishment for our rejection of revealed truth, God has allowed men and women to suffer the consequences of their perversions. St. Paul reminds us that because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were they thankful, and because they changed the truth of God into a lie, God gave them up to a reprobate mind, to do those things that are not fitting, and darkened their minds. The rejection of the truth always has serious consequences.

Through his prophets God repeatedly proclaimed that he would not permit the Gentiles to go on forever in their false, man-made religion. When the time was right a call would go out to all the nations – a call for them to leave their own ways and come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the God whom he revealed. When God came to earth to reveal himself in Christ, this event was announced to the Gentiles by a star. And before God withdrew his visible presence from us, Christ gave his followers a command to preach the good news of salvation to everyone. He said of himself: “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me.” His disciples proclaimed, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” St. Paul, in reference to the time before Christ had been revealed to the Gentiles, wrote: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Biblical history shows us that faith in Christ is the only way that God intended. The flood wiped out any other religion and left Noah and his family as the keepers of his truth. When they failed God called Abraham and his descendants

to guard his truth. There were always believers outside of Israel, but the Jews were the guardians. In the New Testament we see God’s good news proclaimed to the entire world. Israel may have preserved God’s truth, but through Christ, God turned it outward to all men and women and all peoples and nations because sin is something that everyone is guilty of. We’re all sinners and God sent his truth as the cure for our sin. Today there isn’t a nation on the earth where you won’t find faithful followers of Christ. Sometimes we hear talk of a need for “one world religion” – we already have it. The only religion for you and me and the whole world is faith in Jesus Christ.

But why then, if faith in Jesus Christ is *the* world religion, do so many people reject it? Maybe even worse, why do so many who profess to be Christian totally fail to show any evidence of that faith? Why are there still those who reject the Gospel? You’d think that something with Almighty God behind it would be different in that respect – you’d think that God would say it and everyone would hear it and accept it, but that’s not what happens. This isn’t anything new – we’ve had this problem from the beginning. Remember that when the magi came to Jerusalem to worship the King, nobody seemed particularly glad or happy over the Saviour. Those in the city who took any notice were actually upset. Herod was afraid. Nobody joined the magi when they made the final trip to Bethlehem. But that didn’t stop them. They knew that men love darkness instead of light. The good news had won them over. They put their trust in the Messiah of Israel. They wanted the salvation he offered. The unbelief of others didn’t shake their resolve to seek and find him – because they knew that he was the only hope for a dying world.

People still reject the gospel today for the same reason. Herod was afraid that the Messiah would take his throne away. The people were afraid that he’d disrupt business as usual. They were happy with where they were and that took precedence over anything the Messiah would bring. We’re no different 2000 years later. People love material things or they look for their own power and don’t take any interest in Christ. A lack of interest, a fear of change, or an upset in life are the natural attitude of blind and sinful men. When we are no longer obsessed with

material things and when we’re no longer indifferent to the gospel, then we know that God has worked a miracle in us. When that happens we’ve been born a second time and have been given a new nature. God has poured his love into our hearts and that love drives out the love of self and the love of the material world.

But it doesn’t stop inside us. His love in *our* hearts reaches *out* to everyone else. It drives out selfishness and makes us think of others. The love of Christ in our hearts is the love that gave life for all men and women. We hold the faith that is the only hope for the world – the only religion that will save. We need to be sharing that good news. We’ve seen the star. We’ve found the Saviour. We’ve come with the magi to Bethlehem and have seen the true God. We must learn to worship him and worship him only.

This is the divine solution for the problems of the world. But how is the message to get out? When he finished his work of redemption, Our Lord withdrew his visible presence from the earth and ascended to heaven. But before he withdrew his visible body, he created another body for himself that continues his work of salvation on earth. This is the body that has him as its head – it’s his Church, the body of all faithful people. In Ephesians, St. Paul writes, “He has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the Church, which is his body.” And in 1 Corinthians, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” He is the head over all things and under his feet all things were put for the Church – his body – which has been committed to the evangelisation of the world. His last words to his body here on earth were: “Go and make disciples of all nations” by baptising and teaching. “And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” We, the ones who profess to love him and for his sake to love our fellow men and women, are to function as members of the body in which he continues his presence on earth.

If we fail in this calling we’ve failed Our Lord. The members of his body, united with him by love, aren’t supposed to do his will like slaves either. He said, “You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for

all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:14-15). Making disciples of all nations by baptising and teaching shouldn't be a chore. It's an arrangement between loving friends – a sharing in the work that brought God to earth and cost him his life. It's a partnership in God's divine work of salvation!

Each week when we come to Holy Communion we partake of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine and in doing this we proclaim his death, resurrection, and ascension. In that communion we should be reminded of the fellowship we have with our Saviour. He has chosen to make us his partners. He is our head and he contributes everything he's done to redeem us. But as partners we have to make our contribution too – however imperfect it may be. For our part we need to take up the task of sharing the good news of Christ's salvation with the world.

As we proclaim Our Lord as our Saviour and King and enter again into that partnership with him by accepting the gifts he has given to us, we declare our eager willingness to function as members of Christ's body and to assume the obligation of making disciples of all the nations.

Please pray with me: Our Father, you manifested your Son to the Gentiles with the leading of a star. We ask that you would grant us that grace to be that star to a world of lost people today. Guide us, Lord, and let us be your light in our dark world, leading men and women to the Saviour, in whose name we pray. Amen.