

Homily for Epiphany of the Lord

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By Fr. Thomas Joseph

Today, the church celebrates the feast of epiphany. A realization that Christ is the Son of God! Adoration of the Magi consolidates the event of incarnation of Jesus as Son of God.

In the Gospel, we realize that the prophecy of Isaiah started being fulfilled when the star led the wise men to the newborn king. God in his goodness caused a star to appear in the sky, a sign the wise men understood, as a sign that the Savior was born. Though the star guided them, the wise men had to still search for the newborn king. They thought that Jerusalem was the obvious place for the king to be born, but on reaching there, the star disappeared as though signaling that they were looking in the wrong place.

The wise men are like so many of us looking for God led by our own expectations, often leading us to disappointment. We must ask for help as the wise men did, as we cannot manage the faith journey on our own. Only when Herod sent them on the way to Bethlehem did the star reappeared and led them to the birthplace of Jesus. They had put in their efforts to seek the Lord and now their eyes are opened with enlightenment. Though they saw just a helpless babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, they recognized him as the Savior of the world.

It is easy to get bogged down with things not meeting our expectations. It is only the light of faith that helps us to see what God wants to reveal to us. When the wise men recognized the child, they worshipped him and offered him the gifts they had brought. We cannot approach God empty-handed, even the simplest of offerings, is acceptable to God and in return we ourselves are doubly blessed. Like the Magi, when we have this vision of God, we ourselves are changed, we are blessed, and we can no more return to the same way of life. The gospel narrative tells us that the wise men, being warned in a dream returned by another way back home.

Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord is just as hopeful and relevant to our lives as all the other stories that surround the birth of Jesus.

Evangelist Matthew provides a preview of what is to come later in his gospel. The reactions of various individuals to the birth of Jesus parallel the effects that Jesus' teaching will have on those who hear it: Herod reacts with anger and hostility. The chief priests and scribes greet the news with indifference toward the Jesus who comes to give new life and meaning to the rituals and laws of the scribes.

For St. Mathew, the magi possess the humility and the openness of mind and heart to seek and welcome Jesus. Their following of the star is a journey of faith, a constant search for meaning, for purpose, for the things of God. Nor were they deterred on that journey, even as they encountered people and events along the way that had the potential to keep them from achieving their goal. Their search mirrors our own life-long search for compassion, justice, peace and forgiveness. Therein we find the heart of the message of this Epiphany celebration.

In addition to the significance of the magi's search for God, however, there's something else that speaks to us today from Matthew's gospel. We're told that the magi are "from the east." They were foreigners to the people of Israel. They didn't belong. And they certainly didn't deserve to encounter the living God. That belonged to the chosen ones. Yet, in being welcomed into the presence of the child Jesus by Mary, his mother, the magi remind us that the gift of the Savior – Jesus – is given to the whole world. Jesus comes for all who seek his presence in their lives – the people of Israel – and Gentiles as well – foreigners who are looking for God. And all of us, to a certain extent, are foreigners – not because of our country of origin, but because of our life style, our behavior, our addictions, our struggles and so many other aspects of our lives. The message of gospel that is proclaimed on this great feast is that all of us are welcome to encounter the Christ. No one is excluded from the love of God.

Finally, the magi encountered the child Jesus, they prostrated themselves, "did him homage" and their lives were undoubtedly changed forever. Pope Benedict XVI described such ultimate faith experiences, like those of the magi, in these words: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person – Jesus Christ – who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." The Holy Father went on to say that "faith is above all a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, an experience of his closeness, his friendship, his love; only in this way does one learn to know him ever more, and to love and follow him ever more."

The magi, thus, remind us that as Christians – as those who encounter Jesus – we are incomplete if we live a life closed in upon ourselves. We are incomplete if we live life only for ourselves and are lacking love. We are incomplete until we *receive* the love of God, and learn to freely offer this love to all whom God has placed within our lives.

My brothers and sisters, this great day of celebration of the Epiphany of the Lord has much to offer us on our journey of faith. In Bethlehem, the magi found the fulfillment of all that they were seeking in their lives. So will we ... if we engage the journey of faith honestly ... if we acknowledge our need for God's merciful presence in our lives ... and if we are humble and generous enough to welcome and serve others along the way.