

Epiphany 2018 SML
MT 2:1-12

Whenever you read scripture, there are always two directions for the reader to go. One direction is the spiritual.

Hardly any biblical story has caught the imagination, or stimulated so much research and reflection as the Magi from the land of sunrise who followed the star.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, behold wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem saying, ‘Where is the newborn born king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage . . . Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. . . ’” (3:1-2)

What sort of people were they, these “Magi” from the “land of sunrise?” Several possible answers. At one end of the spectrum, magi could be understood as members of the Persian priestly class. They were regarded as “leaders of a distinctive religion,” and at the same time, strongly influenced philosophy, so much so, that the Greek philosophers were often understood to be their pupils. For example, Aristotle himself refers to the philosophical works of the Magi.

At the other end of the spectrum, magi could be understood as deceivers and seducers. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles (13:10), St. Paul calls on the carpet the Magi Elymas, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all that is right, full of every sort of deceit and fraud!”

The Magi in today’s gospel, possess enough religious and philosophical wisdom to set them off in the right direction towards Jesus Christ, as opposed to the other type of Magi as found in Acts, who pits his own power against the Apostle Paul, and therefore sides with the demons.

For the Magi in today’s gospel to use a star to set out on the path to find a king, they could have been astronomers, but not everyone who observe the stars and make predictions would have associated a star with a king in Judea. Therefore, before the star could convey that message, there had to be in circulation at the time, a promise that the ruler of the world would emerge from Judah. Yet, even with the rumors floating, a star would not have prompted people to set off on a journey, unless they were:

- ✓ people of inner unrest,
- ✓ people of hope,

✓ people on the lookout for the True Star of Salvation.

But the men of whom Matthew spoke were not just astronomers. They were “wise.” They personify that dynamic of religion which involves:

✓ a search for the truth,

✓ a search for the true God,

hence “philosophy” in the fullest sense of the word. These wise men take reason and science to the highest possibilities.

These wise men were the forerunners for all those who seek after truth in every age.

Once these wise and learned men found the Christ Child, they prostrated themselves before Him. In Greek, the word is, they literally threw themselves on the ground before Him, hence the homage that is offered to a divine king. And the gifts these men brought can only make sense if they are brought before a king, and not just a babe in arms. Their gifts acknowledge the royal dignity of Him to whom they are offered. In the Church’s tradition these gifts represent three aspects of the mystery of Christ:

1. the gold points to Our Blessed Lord’s kingship,

2. the incense to His divine sonship,

3. and the myrrh to the mystery of His Passion.

I started this evening's/morning's homily by saying that whenever you read scripture, there are always two directions for the reader to go. Either the direction is the spiritual or the direction is pragmatic. For example, God did not split the Red Sea in two. It was obviously low tide. For crying out loud . . .

I received a very funny Christmas card this year from my sister the doctor. The caption read, "After the three wise men left, the three wiser women arrived with fresh diapers, casseroles for the week and lots of formula." Not for anything, but pragmatic as the wiser women may have been, think about how many diapers, casseroles and formula you could buy with just a smidge of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

I've heard the story of the Three Wise Men, the story of Epiphany a hundred times in my life time. This is the first year I ever asked the question, "What did Mary and Joseph do with the gold, frankincense and myrrh?"

The traditional Christian narrative holds that Jesus was born into a poor and insignificant family at the outskirts of the civilized world. His family was unable to pay for a room at the inn (Luke 2:7) because they were poor, and offered the poor

man's sacrifice of two turtledoves when Mary and Joseph presented Him in the Temple (Luke 2:22-24). They lived in the village of Nazareth, hardly the center of anything economically, culturally and politically important. Yet the wise men gave them the kinds of gifts that should have transformed the lives of Mary and Joseph, at least economically. How much they were given, we don't know, but a coffer could be the size of a treasure chest.

Earlier I said the story of the Epiphany stimulates research. In my research, I found that some have assumed that the gifts financed the flight to Egypt and Joseph's establishing a business there.

Others say that while the Bible doesn't literally give us an answer. It does give us some strong clues.

Consider what the texts tell us about Jesus. How is it that Jesus was able to read and reason like a rabbi, having come from such impoverished circumstances and an “off the beaten path, backwoods” town like Nazareth?

How does a child born into a poor family become such a compelling figure capable of arguing with the teachers at age 12?

One answer robs Him of His humanity. That is, His ability to read in the synagogue, from scroll of Isaiah, as recorded in Luke 4, for example, came from His divinity.

Another answer is the pre-Protestant work ethic. He worked harder than everyone else, teaching himself Hebrew and studying the Hebrew texts by the fireplace until the break of dawn.

A third answer is that he was born with an IQ off the charts, that boy Jesus was a genetic anomaly.

A fourth speculative answer is His parents invested most of the gold in his education and future vocation, anticipating great things from their son says Matthew and Luke (Luke 1:32-33 and Matthew 1:20-21). Because without the gold, answering the following questions becomes tricky:

- ✓ Where did Jesus get the training to ask probing questions of the teachers in the temple and astonish them with his insight (Luke 2:46-47)?
- ✓ Where did he learn to read (Luke 4:16)?
- ✓ How was he able to teach in the synagogues "with authority" (Luke 4:32)?
- ✓ What gave him the confidence to interface with the tax collectors, who were among the wealthiest members of society?

- ✓ How was Jesus able to finance 12 disciples? Remember some of the disciples had families. How did these families sustain themselves while their husbands were wandering all over the country?

Persian gold certainly helps answer questions about the education and vocation of the Palestinian prophet who is Our Blessed Lord.

I spoke to a good priest friend and he said he was taught the gold was used for the holy grail (or the chalice used at the Last Supper), and the frankincense and myrrh were used by Joseph of Arimathea when he buried Our Blessed Lord. However, the Gospels tell us the women made their way to the tomb early Easter Sunday morning to anoint the body. If Joseph of Arimathea used the myrrh from His Nativity, why would the women need to anoint Him again?

To me, all this pragmatism rings hollow answers and seems a bit mercenary. Although I raised the question, I am in no position to question the moral obligations of the Blessed Mother regarding the gold, frankincense and myrrh. However, imagining what happened to the wise men's gold should spark our own moral imagination about what will happen with our

own gifts at Christmas and what do we do with our own abundance.

The best answer regarding the moral obligations of the Blessed Mother regarding the gold, frankincense and myrrh, and our own moral obligation about what we do with our abundance is found in a book recording the visions of the mystics:

St. Elizabeth of Schoenau

St. Bridget of Sweden

Venerable Mother Mary Agreda

And Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich

entitled The Life of Mary as Seen by the Mystics. Regarding the choice presents given by the Magi, Mary set them aside for charity, which is a reading of this scripture which is both spiritual and pragmatic.