

Epiphany – 2024

Long before the age of science and space exploration, long before Galileo and the telescope, our ancestors were also fascinated by the stars – visible but inaccessible, changing yet regular in their patterns, reliable but not subject to human control. They observed them, mapped them, used them as guides. And sometimes, they also related the movements of the heavens with events in human history – omens, signs in the sky to predict the future or announce great events. This is the context of the Magi, these “wise men from the East.” *Their beliefs may seem simpleminded by modern standards, but they were not superstitious men; they were searching for wisdom and truth, looking for the Power that gave meaning and purpose to a changing world.* More than just curious scholars, they represent the first calling of all peoples to come to God’s mercy brought into the world by Jesus. They were willing to go on a difficult journey to seek this Power behind the heavens, without knowing just what they would find.

And so they follow this new Star, one of the iconic symbols of Epiphany. Scholars will continue to argue, as they did even in early Christian centuries: was the Star just a story, or an angel, or a supernova, or the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn that can be traced back in astronomical charts? Whatever the truth of it, the meaning was summarized succinctly by Pope Benedict: *it is not the star that determines the child’s destiny; it is this Child who directs the star.* The wise found was not a vague cosmic force, but a Person to whom they could present their gifts – indeed, a baby they could approach with awe and respect, but without fear. The Magi saw only the beginning as God revealed Himself in the infant Jesus. What they expected for the future is not clear. And they did not find Him where they expected, in a royal palace; rather, in a humble, everyday setting. *But they were wise enough to know that great things often have small and obscure beginnings, and to follow wherever their search took them.*

The Magi could not have fully realized Who Jesus was when they saw Him with Mary; but their gifts are themselves prophetic signs: gold, worthy of a king’s power; incense, fitting for one Who is the great High

Priest; and myrrh, used both to make medicine and burial ointment, symbolic of the healing sacrifice of His death and resurrection. Then Matthew says returned to their own land by another way. We too are sent forth from an encounter with Jesus, back to familiar places and people, but in a new way, for ***Epiphany teaches us that God reveals divine mercy in unexpected moments.*** Like the Magi, we may only see the beginning, the planting of seeds; or the apparently empty time when hidden growth is happening that we cannot observe. Following a star might sound naïve, but even today people will follow many signs and voices. Epiphany too helps us reflect on whose guidance actually directs our choices.

When we come to Jesus today, we bring not gold, but our trust and love; not incense, but prayer that believes in blessings we may not ourselves see; not myrrh, but our own sacrifices and sufferings that need to be healed by Jesus. Pope Benedict once said it well: faith assures us that ***Heaven is not empty. Life is not a simple product of scientific laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and above everything, there is God, Who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love.*** So perhaps tonight you might look up at the stars, even if it is cloudy, and find hope in remembering that you belong to the One Whom the stars obey.