

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
Epiphany of the Lord
January 8, 2023**

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6	All nations are invited to praise God.
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6	All have been called to hear the Good News.
Matthew 2:1-12	The nations come to worship the Christ.

Matthew:

Matthew drew upon the heritage that he and his community had been given concerning the Christ, Jesus the Lord, to reassure his audience that they were on the right path in having welcomed Gentiles into their church community. Was it not clear even in the prophets, particularly Isaiah, that all the *Nations* (Gentiles) would also be welcome at God’s holy mountain (Zion) in Jerusalem? Was that not a sign that God’s will was being fulfilled in the days of the Messiah?

The *Magi* came as a result of their own sincere search for an ultimate answer in following wherever their science led them. They brought gifts, a sign of their willingness to honor the One they sought. The text does not say how many Magi there were. We infer from the number of gifts that there were three. Later Christian art has depicted them as *Kings*. Again, that is an inference from the kinds of gifts they brought: *gold and frankincense*. These kinds of gifts were reserved for kings or for God (Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 6:20; Psalm 72:10-11). There can be no doubt that Matthew intends to convey that this Child needs to be seen as a Messiah-King. *Myrrh* was an aromatic gum used in the process of embalming. We have here an obvious allusion to the future death of the Messiah-King who has just been born.

Coming to Jerusalem, the Magi ask for the *King of the Jews*. That was Herod’s title! No wonder he became suspicious! He felt threatened.

From the very beginning, the Gospel loses no time in identifying Jesus as *rejected* by the leadership of the Jewish people. Herod stands for the Jewish nation here. (Is it not ironic that Gentiles seek to honor him while Herod seeks to kill him?) The *shedding of blood* foreshadows the Passion and death that will await him.

Bethlehem was the place of his birth. Early Christians may have been confused by the fact that Jesus was recognized as being from Nazareth in Galilee, way up north. How could we say that he was the Messiah-King in the line of King David who had been born and brought up in Bethlehem of Judea, not in that semi-pagan area in the “Galilee of the Gentiles”? So, he was from Bethlehem after all! The Jewish-Christian community for whom Matthew wrote this Gospel has now incorporated a significant number of Gentile believers. Now, all could feel reconciled since Jesus was both a descendant of King David and a man with affinities to the Gentile world.

In the ancient world of Mediterranean culture, all these allusions and symbolic references gave a most powerful testimony as to the true identity of Jesus Christ. In a culture where a case for divine messiahship can be made mostly from literary allusions and symbolic happenings rather than from abstract argumentation, these lines speak in loud tones concerning the meaning of who Christ really is. No declarative statement would have had anywhere near the same effect as all these references to Jewish Scriptures and to Jewish expectations.

People today still seek an answer to life's questions. Where can we find the fulfillment of all our hopes and desires? Is there a God who has come from across the great divide between heaven and earth to reach out to us and to give us access to the divine realm? Can we trust that all the evil powers which seem to be arrayed against us and our way of life will not prevail in the end? The Herods of this world will all lose their power!

Isaiah:

Toward the end of the Babylonian Exile, a prophet known to us as the "3rd Isaiah," in the tradition of the Great Isaiah of Jerusalem, speaks of the time to come when the people would not only be restored to their homeland but that all nations would come to them to share their blessing. Now that the sin of unfaithfulness to the covenant has been expiated in the Exile, Israel will return home, rebuild their city and their temple, and from their newfound faithfulness will be able to offer a witness to all the people of the earth that God loves them, too. All the nations (the Gentiles) will be invited to come into the presence of God and to enjoy the blessings first promised to the Jewish people.

Ephesians:

In a "letter" written to second or third generation Christians by a disciple of Paul, we hear that all the people of the earth are called to be united in the work of salvation brought by Jesus Christ. The "secret plan" of God turned out to be the removal of barriers or of separations between nations and races. The Jews are no longer the only Chosen People; the Greeks are not the sole possessors of wisdom. All are united in Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the *star* that leads you on your quest for answers in your life? Do you have a sure guide in your search for the ultimate meaning of your life and of the world around you? Are you following your own self-centered path, or have you accepted someone outside yourself whose credentials are trustworthy in the search for truth and for perfect happiness? Do you trust Christ as the One who can lead you to the heavenly Father?

2. Imagine the Church as that little community of faithful believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It needs to be reassured that it has made the right choices in trying to integrate people from different backgrounds who otherwise would not have thought that they belonged together in the same fellowship. How can this Gospel be of help to us as a community of faith?

3. Herod had responsibilities before God and toward the people of his kingdom. He chose to focus on his own fears, his greed, and his lusts rather than to trust in God's power and support. Is there a bit of "Herod" also in each of us? In what ways do we sometimes give in to our less than ideal selves rather than stand up with courage for what is right, no matter what the cost?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Most of the Catholics in the world practice gift giving at Epiphany rather than at Christmas. It is appropriate to give gifts especially to people we do not even know or someone from a foreign land in imitation of the Magi.

Send a small donation to: **Catholic Relief Services, c/o Diocese of Portland, 510 Ocean Avenue, Portland, ME 04103**

PRAYER

(A Prayer for Those in Authority; based on Psalm 72)

**Please help those with power to be honest and fair,
just like you, our God.
Let them be honest and fair with all your people, especially the poor,
Let peace and justice rule.**

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

It is the will of God that all people on the face of the earth achieve salvation in the kingdom of heaven. God did not create men and women for damnation. The universal love of God extends to all persons, of all races, of all conditions, of all times. No person stands automatically outside the saving will of God.

| “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The Church ministers to the whole world, calling people to knowledge of Jesus Christ in order that they might believe in him and have access to the heavenly kingdom. The missionary task of the Church still remains to be done. Not everyone has heard of Christ. Not everyone has yet come to believe in him. None can rest until the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus has been proclaimed to all men, women, and children everywhere. Each generation requires a new evangelization effort, since there are new people who have to be told of the love of God.

The work of evangelizing is not an “extra” task, just for those who have the time and talent for such things. It is the work of the whole community of faith. All who have themselves come to know Jesus Christ must carry the message to those who have not yet heard and have not yet been converted.

The call to salvation is not addressed in any exclusive way to any special group or persons: not to men nor to women only; not just to the young or to the old; not to the educated or to the uneducated; not to whites only; not only to those who are successful in business; not only to the single but to the married also; not only to the people of North America; not just to the Jewish people; Gentiles, too, are invited by God to share in the happiness of heaven forever.

God “desires all (...) to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The “truth” is Jesus Christ in person.

(See: The Catechism #74 & #543)

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