

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The First Sunday after the Epiphany

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. ⁱⁱ

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**] and Ephah [**EE-fah**], all they from Sheba [**Shee-BAH**] shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew [**SHOW**] forth the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar [**KEY-darr**] shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth [**Knee-BYE-oth**] shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish [**TARR-shish**] first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the LORD thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew. ⁱⁱⁱ

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his

star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.^{iv} Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[O]pening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense, and myrrh.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

As you know, the non-Catholic portion of the Christian world ignores the Church’s traditional Advent season and confuses the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, to the point where we hear “We three kings of orient are” sung during Advent with the intention of it’s being a Christmas carol, even though the Magi’s visit almost certainly took place at least two years after Christ’s birth.

Similarly, Christmas cards and other iconic images of the Christmas and Epiphany seasons make the three Magi—usually crowned as kings rather than dressed as scholars, and usually second in the compositions to the dramatic silhouettes of their camels—familiar, indeed, all-too-familiar, reminders of this Feast of the Epiphany.

Theme:

As the proverbial phrase has it, “Familiarity breeds contempt” or, if not precisely contempt, at best a sort of benign disregard based on the unfounded feeling that we already know all we need to understand about these so-called “kings”. That misimpression is a great misfortune, because these three men are, in at least two separate and very important ways, symbols of vital aspects of the New Testament revelation.

Development:

As we probably all remember, the Epiphany is the feast that celebrates “Christ’s showing to the Gentiles”, meaning to the non-Jewish “nations” of the world. And the most important part of its meaning is that “showing”, for the very meaning of an “epiphany” is the revelation of some very significant truth. Thus we sometimes say, when someone has come to an important realization, “he had an epiphany”, meaning “he suddenly understood something that previously had been opaque to him”.

To begin to understand the full significance of this “showing of Christ to the nations”, we need first to examine who these “Magi” really were. Ethnically or nationally, they were *Medes*,^{vi} members of one of the two great peoples that made up the ancient state known as “the empire of the Medes and the Persians”. There is a reference to them in the book of Esther, where it is noted that one of the peculiarities of their constitution was that once a law was promulgated for the Medes, that law could never be amended or repealed.^{vii}

By profession, these men were *priests*, priests of Persia’s ancient national religion, Zoroastrianism.^{viii} (Until the Muslim conquest in the Seventh Century, Zoroastrianism prevailed throughout what is now Iran; today, it survives there only in small pockets and the majority of its

adherents, called the “Parsees” or “Persians”, live either in India or in the Indian diaspora.)

These Zoroastrian priests were skilled in astrology and in the interpretation of dreams, and lived near colonies of Jews who were the remnants of the Babylonian Exile. From their own background, they would have recognized some unusual sign in the heavens and would have understood it to be the precursor of an event of world-wide importance. From their Jewish neighbors, they would have learned that this event was to be the birth of the Messiah, whom they like their Jewish friends assumed would be a “king”, and from the same sources would have learned that this birth would take place to the west of them, in Palestine.

The next thing we need to remember to appreciate the full significance of these “Magi” is the concept of *typology*. In Scripture, a “type” is a person or an event that in some way prefigures and helps to explain the significance of a later person or event; the thing or person that or who is thus prefigured or foreshadowed is called the “anti-type”.

The Epiphany event actually contains two such “types”. First, there are the Magi themselves—traditionally three of them although Scripture does not designate a number. They were sent to Our Lord as representatives of the non-Jewish nations of the world; in other words, they are “types” of the expansion of the new Church, the opening up of the Covenant to people by faith rather than by birth, that was one of the principal purposes in Our Lord’s Incarnation among us.

We see the beginning of the “anti-type” of this symbolic visit of the Magi, that is, of the event that it prefigures, in the eighth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. There, after the persecution that included the murder of St. Stephen, the disciples fled and dispersed from Jerusalem throughout Palestine. St. Philip went to Samaria, the historic home of the Jews’ hated and estranged cousins, and there converted some of those Samaritans to the new Faith.^{ix}

After this, Philip was responsible for spreading the Faith even further afield, when he witnessed to and then baptized the treasurer of

the Queen of Ethiopia;^x to this day, Ethiopia's native Coptic Church is one of the strongholds of Christianity in northeast Africa.

Philip's evangelistic feats are not the only "anti-types" of the Magi's visit, for they were followed, of course, by St. Peter's mission to certain Roman officials such as Cornelius the Centurion of Joppa.^{xi} That, in turn, was followed by Saints Peter and Paul's work in Damascus and Antioch and then by St. Barnabas and St. Paul and their great missionary journeys to Asia Minor and Greece, all of which involved the immediate spread of the new Christian Faith beyond the ethnic boundaries of the Jewish people.

The second "type" that we find in the story of the Magi and their visit to the Christ child involves the gifts that they presented to Him: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

To understand the significance of these gifts, we must pause for a moment to consider the three types of agent in the Old Testament through whom God dealt with humanity. These three types of representative or mandatary were the *prophet*, the *priest*, and the *king*. The prophet declares God's will to mankind, the priest leads the people in the worship of God, and the king rules on God's behalf, maintaining the state of civil society which is necessary for religion and the virtues to flourish.

We can see an example of these three functionaries, in the form of separate individuals coöperating in furtherance of God's plans, in the first Chapter of the First Book of the Kings. There, King David commanded Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet to anoint his son Solomon as David's successor as King of the Israelites.^{xii}

Notice, however, that in the Old Testament, with one notable exception, that of the mysterious Melchizedek, King and Priest of Salem,^{xiii} all three of these functions were always performed by separate people. However, the Old Testament foresees—particularly in Psalm 110^{xiv}—that in the New Testament, these three essential functions are to be united in one Person, the Second Person of the Holy and Undivided Trinity,^{xv} as is testified to in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

And it is *that* revelation of Jesus the Christ as the new and final Prophet, Priest, and King that is the “anti-type” for which the “type” is composed of the gifts presented to Him by the Magi. Of these, gold represents the taxes and tribute paid to earthly Kings. Frankincense, the dried sap of trees that grow in Somalia and southern Arabia, is symbolic of the Priest, as you will recall from the story of the birth of John the Baptist, in which John’s father, the priest Zachariah, was offering incense on the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem^{xvi} when the angel announced to him the coming birth of Zachariah’s son.

Lastly, the Magi gave the Christ child myrrh, which is the dried sap of another family of trees that grows in the same region as does frankincense. In ancient times, this sap was thought to have medicinal properties, which could make it a sign of the healings Christ would perform during His ministry here on earth. More importantly, however, it was associated with the preparation of bodies for burial. One could almost say it was the ancient world’s equivalent of our embalming fluid.

This might seem an odd way of symbolizing Christ’s function as the great and final Prophet, until we recall what was too often the fate of faithful prophets in the Old Testament. For example, Elijah was hounded by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel,^{xvii} who sought his death because he had been too faithful in preaching God’s message to the people.

This common fate for prophets is summarized in Our Lord’s parable of the sharecroppers^{xviii} who beat and killed their landlord’s rent collectors and, finally, did the same to that landlord’s son and heir. In that parable, of course, the rent collectors are metaphors for the prophets and the son and heir is a metaphor for the Messiah, so that son and heir’s murder is a foretelling of the death of Christ the Great High Priest, for which the Magi’s gift of myrrh was a “type”.

Conclusion:

We are among those non-Jewish nations that were represented during this visitation by the Magi. Those gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh were given on our behalves, to symbolize the Christ’s triple rôle in our lives as our great and final Prophet, Priest, and King.

Those gifts were given to symbolize, and to remind us, that instead of our dying in the service of our King, as was the fate of so many subjects of Middle Eastern monarchs, this Prophet, Priest, and King would willingly die for us, to make it possible for us to be reconciled to God the Father so as to live in fellowship with Him and the other Persons of the Trinity.

What do you suppose is the frame of mind that is appropriate for us to form when we contemplate this gift and sacrifice of God Himself? What responses to you think we should be making when we realize just what it is that God has, quite unnecessarily, done for us?

Who among us dares to think that we are forming our hearts and minds into those ways of thought, and conforming our deeds and actions appropriately, so as to be suitable responses to these unprecedented gifts?

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January 8, 2012.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 60:1-9 (KJV). If Epiphany I falls on January 13, read Isaiah 60: 10 instead.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Matthew 2:1-12 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Cf. Micah 5:2. See also St. John 7:42.*

^v *St. Matthew 2:11b (RSV).*

^{vi} *Drum, W. (1910). "Magi", in The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved January 7, 2012 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09527a.htm>.*

^{vii} *E.g., Esther 1:19.*

^{viii} *Drum, op. cit.*

^{ix} *Acts 8:1-24.*

^x *Acts 8:26-39.*

^{xi} *Acts 10:1-48.*

^{xii} *I Kings 1:32-39.*

^{xiii} *Genesis 14:18.*

^{xiv} *Psalm 110:3-5.*

^{xv} *Hebrews 7:1-10.*

^{xvi} *St. Luke 1:9-10.*

^{xvii} *I Kings 17.*

^{xviii} *Matthew 21:33-44; cf. Mark 12:1-12 & Luke 20:9-18.*

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