

## The Epiphany - The Showing Forth

Today we hear the story of the Magi. As we recall their journey to Bethlehem, we can see a pattern that is repeated in the faith journey of everyone who seeks to know God.

- God gets our attention; something unsettles our fixed world
- We look for answers; by grace our quest leads to God's Word
- If we have the courage and patience, we can persevere and act on what we learn
- By a continuing path of discovery, God draws us closer and closer, helping us avoid pitfalls and dangers
- When we have approached our goal, He reveals His Son; we experience a deeper sense of worship and self-offering, and gradually we become more responsive to God's inner promptings through His Spirit

The appearance of the "star", possibly a conjunction of a planet and a star, or even a comet and a planet or star is a prominent part of the story. Astronomers using computer models have been able to project backward based on the known movements of various planets, stars, and comets to identify a rare conjunction that could be the event that the magi observed. This conjunction would have been observed in the southwestern sky when viewed from Babylon. That is the direction of the Holy Land. The astronomical knowledge of the Babylonian Magi has been validated by current science. They made accurate observations. However, the magi went beyond the phenomena of the southwestern night sky to ask its meaning. In that, they crossed over the line of what. They asked what does this mean?

Yet, this is exactly how you and I begin our own spiritual journey in life, isn't it? Our journey often begins with a kind of searching for meaning or purpose, for something more than the bare facts of life. You might say that we begin to ask, "Is this all there is?" or "Why am I here?" "What happens when I die?" How do I interpret the coincidences that seem to point me toward something greater, something that demands my allegiance? The magi were asking that kind of question and were connecting their search to the Jewish people. Israel was southwest from Mesopotamia across the forbidding Syrian Desert where today the cruel war for control of western Iraq and Syria was recently fought.

The magi saw in the astronomical event a sign of the rising of a Jewish King. Now Jewish people had been living in the Mesopotamia, the area from which the Magi came, for about six centuries, following the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king

Nebuchadnezzar. Some Jews had returned to live in the Holy Land, and others had remained behind in Mesopotamia. The Jewish religion and was known and respected. The magi, who were Gentiles and not Jews, set out for Jerusalem on a quest - having some pieces of the puzzle but lacking others. They looked for a King of the Jews but perhaps not altogether knowing why. Seeking.

The next stop on the journey was Jerusalem where they seek more specific information; their search becomes more focused. This is similar to when our groping coincides with the God of the Sacred Scriptures. Herod the usurper King of Israel gets wind of the Magi's question about a newborn king. Always worried about a threat to his illegitimate regime, Herod is troubled. A new king, a political upheaval, a new dynasty? Won't the Romans have something to say about this? Herod, who himself was not Jewish, none the less, knew where to go for information about the birth place of the Messiah: to the chief priests and scribes. Notice that Herod does not send the Magi directly to these scholars: he wants control over the flow of information. Quoting the prophet Micah, the scholars inform Herod that Bethlehem, David's hometown, is the place in which the Messiah would be born. Herod next questions the Magi as to the time when the star first appeared. Having gotten what he wanted, He stealthily tried to turn the Magi's quest into a reconnaissance mission for his own evil purposes, to confirm all the information so that he can strike down a potential rival still in the crib. That was the kind of "homage" Herod intended.

The Magi are unaware of Herod's evil intention. The direction from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is still southwesterly and so the appearance of the star would naturally have seemed to them to confirm their path, the path they had been on since leaving Mesopotamia. They were filled with exceeding great joy. Their search is grace-filled and they are protected from the evil machinations of the King. When they arrive, they find Jesus and his mother Mary in the house where they were staying. Upon finding them, their response was to worship, they surrender things of value making obvious the ultimate value of this newborn Messiah. Each of their gifts is highly symbolic of Jesus' future role. Our worship too makes plain the ultimate importance we attach to Jesus Christ versus other important values in our lives.

The last leg of the Magi's journey is their way home on which they were guided by direct revelation from God, in this case through a dream. They are warned not to return to Herod and therefore they unwittingly avoid being used by Herod further. Their journey leaves them changed men: they began by following a star; they are now following the promptings of God.

Our journey to God leads us to Jesus Christ and thence to a transformed relationship with the Father. To find our way toward God we need to encounter His Word which contains the accumulated wisdom and insight of millennia of human contact with God. We also need a guide to interpret God's Word accurately, Jesus and the Church. Our faith response is worship and self-surrender. By God's grace, we are protected from the evil in the world that would entrap and use us. Instead we are now guided by the Holy Spirit and journey home by another way.

Like them we need Scripture and Tradition, and the teaching ministry of the Church to guide our own spiritual quest. Otherwise we can go in circles as the Magi might have, failing to recognize that others have trod these steps before us and have left a road map to lead us further on and further in. It takes humility for us to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers on our own, that the puzzle of life is not one that we can solve without others' help. How often I have driven miles out of my way because I refused to stop and ask for directions! The Word of God – God's own revelation – enables our search for God to be fruitful.