

EPIPHANY, 2023

For a long time I have liked celebrating the 12th Night and Day of Christmas, January 6, Epiphany. Authorities far above my relatively lowly pay grade decided decades ago to move the ancient Feast of Epiphany from January 6 to a Sunday in the vicinity of January 6, and, as they say, orders are orders. The reason for this, of course, is for more people to be able to participate in the Epiphany Mass, so here we are. Still, my personal Epiphany party is still on the 12th Day of Christmas. This is partly because "Twelfth Night" is one of my favorite Shakespearean plays. It is a fun play, in part because it makes fun of the puritans of every time and place, and puritans are always with us. Puritans: you know the type. They can't ever bring themselves to let people have a party in peace. "With all the sin and suffering in the world, how dare you be so busy eating and drinking?" Most of us have heard versions of this more than once. It is, of course, precisely because sin and suffering are real things that celebration has to be real too. We are called to do more than celebrate, but celebration is itself a defiance of the darkness, and Christian celebration is a proclamation of the words of chapter one of St. John's Gospel, "The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it". I like being able, on Twelfth Night, to taunt a puritan with the words of the Shakespearean roisterer "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Epiphany is a time for cakes and ale, in moderation indeed, but not in stinginess.

As I explained last Sunday, the December 25th Feast of Christmas is in the oldest stratum of the Roman Church's feasts, along with Pentecost and Easter, dating back at least to the 4th Century, and probably to the third (the weekly Lord's Day is, of course, the primordial feast for all of Christianity). In the oldest stratum of feasts for the Egyptian and Syrian Churches we find Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany. "Epiphany" comes from the Greek "epiphaneia - showing forth" The Roman Church chose to celebrate the Lord's Birth, while the Egyptian and Syrian Churches chose to celebrate the day the Father's voice thundered over the waters of the Jordan River, declaring "This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased", the day of His Baptism. St. John Chrysostom, preaching in 386 in the Syrian metropolis of Antioch said this: "How does it happen that not the day on which the Lord was born, but the day on which He was baptized, is called the Epiphaneia (Showing Forth)? . . . We give the name Epiphaneia to the day of the Lord's Baptism because He was not made manifest to all when He was born, but only when He was baptized; for until that time He was unknown to the people at large".

So, the Roman Church celebrated Christmas, the Lord's Birth, with special solemnity on the 25th of December, while the Egyptian and Syrian Churches celebrated the Lord's Baptism, Epiphany, with special solemnity on the 6th of January. As the 4th Century (the 300s) progressed, the Jerusalem, Greek, African, Gallic, and Spanish Churches decided to celebrate both feasts (the Spanish Church adding the slightly grumpy note that the celebration of Epiphany should not include watching chariot races). Why not? There is no Showing Forth of the Lord as the Father's beloved Son unless He is first born, as the Eternal Word now in Flesh appearing. At the same time, the Eternal Word took Flesh in order to show forth Salvation to a human race dwelling in darkness and in the shadow of death. The Lord's Birth and Baptism, Christmas and Epiphany, naturally go together. Not long after the year 400, we find the

Egyptian and Syrian Churches celebrating Christmas, and the Roman Church celebrating Epiphany. With the exception of the Armenians, all the Churches celebrated both feasts.

All of the Western, Latin Churches celebrated Epiphany differently from the Eastern Churches. The Eastern Churches continued to celebrate Epiphany mainly as the Lord's Baptism. One of the biggest annual events of the Greek Church was the January 6 "Megas Hagiasmos", the great blessing of the waters. To this day, the biggest possible blessing of water is the most remarkable part of "Eastern Orthodox" and "Byzantine Catholic" celebrations of Epiphany. The Western, Latin Churches, on the other hand, reflecting on the story of the Magi told in St. Matthew's Gospel, wondered if the Lord's Baptism really was the first "Showing Forth" of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and Son of God. Didn't the earlier visit and worship of the Magi "show Him forth" as Christ and Son of God? We have Epiphany sermons from Pope Leo the Great and from St. Augustine, in which they emphasize the journey of the Magi to worship the Child of Bethlehem, and the ways in which the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh teach Who the Child of Bethlehem truly is. Ever since that time, the Latin Catholic (eventually replaced by the term "Roman Catholic") celebration of Epiphany focuses on how the Magi represent all of the world's Gentiles, or non-Jews, and how their visit shows forth the truth that the Child of Bethlehem, Jesus of Nazareth, is Lord and Savior for all the nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples of the human race.

Pope Leo the Great and St. Augustine were certainly right (of course!) that the Magi were non-Jews, summoned by God to be the first of the Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. St. Matthew's Gospel calls them "Magi", meaning "Wise Men", or "Devoutly Religious Scholars" (Wise Men is much shorter - let's use that). St. Matthew's Gospel does not say how many Wise Men there were, but Pope Leo the Great suggested three, to go with the three gifts St. Matthew mentions, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. All the Latin Churches followed Pope Leo's lead.

I ask you to reflect a moment on those Wise Men. Many people besides those three saw the unique and surprising star of Bethlehem. Many people noticed the star's unusual brightness. Only three noticed the star's message. So it is with Faith. Grown to manhood, the Lord Jesus would warn us that "Many are called, but few are chosen" Many hear and see religious things, but how many take the trouble to think about those things? Many hear and see religious things, but how many have let selfishness and the world's various lusts ("libido dominandi", the lust for power, being by far the most deadly of these) harden their hearts against responding to God's offer of Salvation? Let the three Wise Men stand for all whose hearts are not hardened to God's call.

Following God's call, the Wise Men did a very brave thing. They came before King Herod the Elder, the deeply unpleasant king of greater Judea, and asked "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" Herod's answer, in his heart, was "right here in front of you, fools!" Herod was not of the ancient, Messianic, but long forgotten, House of David. Herod was not even of the more recent, once heroic, but now sadly decayed, House of the Maccabees. Herod was a smart, brave, and entirely ruthless adventurer and politician, who had made himself king by brute force

and clever politics - he had "libido dominandi" in abundance! He did not take kindly to people suggesting that his title to the throne of Israel might be doubtful. Just inquiring about some other King of the Jews was asking for trouble from the murderous old man. Nonetheless, the Wise Men had been given a mission to find that newborn King, and they were going to do their best to find Him, regardless of risks. On Herod's treacherous instructions, Jerusalem's leading religious scholars, learned in the Scriptures of Israel, as the Magi were not, told them that the Prophet Micah had foretold that the little town of Bethlehem would be honored by the Messiah's birth, and that the Wise Men should proceed there.

Notice that not one of Jerusalem's many priests asked to go with the Wise Men. Not one of Jerusalem's many religious scholars asked to go with the Wise Men. They went on their own, helped not by men but by God. God, through the star, showed those faithful three the place where Jesus lay.

What did they find?

A stable.

A quite normal human Baby, Jesus.

A normal man and woman, Mary and Joseph.

Some barnyard animals.

Yet they prostrated themselves before that Baby, and worshipped Him. By Faith, they saw much more than met the eye.

St. Leo the Great, in one of his Epiphany sermons, says "When a star had led them to worship Jesus, they did not find Him exorcising demons, or raising the dead, or restoring sight to the blind, or giving speech to the dumb, or engaged in any divine action. They found a silent baby, depending on His mother's care, giving no sign of power, but exhibiting a miracle of humility."

By the divine miracle of Faith, the Wise Men saw Who that Baby really was, and they gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold proclaimed Him to be a King.

Frankincense proclaimed Him to be true God, now in flesh appearing.

Myrrh proclaimed Him to be true Man, vulnerable to suffering and death, and destined to suffer and die for the redemption of all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh, were not the only gifts the Wise Men offered to the infant Jesus. Along with those visible gifts they offered invisible gifts.

With their gold the Wise Men gave Him their love.

With their frankincense the Wise Men gave Him their prayers.

With their myrrh, the Wise Men gave Him their lives.

May we give the Lord Jesus, present to us in the Holy Eucharist under the still more miraculously humble forms of the Bread and Wine, the very same gifts.

May we give Him our love.
May we give Him our prayers.
May we give Him our lives.

Amen.