

## The Epiphany of the Lord - 2021

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ps 71; Eph 3:2-3.5-6; Matt 2:1-12

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Today is Epiphany. The word means 'made shown' or 'revelation' or 'manifestation'.<sup>1</sup> We are all quite familiar with the story most closely associated with Epiphany: it is the story of the Magi, or as they are sometimes called the kings, or the wisemen. They are from the East, beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. They have read the stars and they follow where those stars lead them because the stars also tell them that a Jewish king is to be born. They come bearing gifts to present to him. King Herod, the local gangster King supported by the Roman authorities interviews them and tells them '*Go and find out all about the child,*' ... '*and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage*'. The Magi find Jesus – he is 'made shown' to them - and they present him with their gifts. Then they depart secretly, not going back to Herod because they are warned in a dream not to.

There is no great clarity as to who the Magi actually were. The magi were a cast of Persian Priests who were practitioners of Zoroaster's religion. (Modern Iran). One of the skills of a magus was the interpretation of dreams.<sup>1</sup> However, astrology suggests that they came from Babylon (Iraq) and, finally the gifts that they carried – Gold, and especially Frankincense, and Myrrh – originate in Ethiopia. The Frankincense and Myrrh we use today come from Ethiopia.

The star – whether it was a star, or a nebula, a comet or a conjunction of planets, - is also partly, or maybe mostly, for the Magi, to

believe. Those of a more scientific bent, think that the wandering star was in fact a conjunction of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn in the year 6 or 7 BC which is the most likely the true year of birth of our Lord.<sup>2</sup> But that is a little detour. This star, as a symbol of light, fulfils prophecy '*a star will come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall arise out of Israel*' (Num 24:17). The Jews were not on the whole great users of astrology – it did not fit easily with their faith - but as I said the Babylonians were. That God should use signs that *they* would understand seems very fitting.

Perhaps who the Magi actually were does not ultimately matter if we can accept the importance of what they represented to Matthew's Jewish community of listeners. They represented Gentiles – non-Jewish people, the people of the whole world like you and me – who are called to recognise Jesus as King. I would not dismiss this as 'just a story – a metaphor - to make a point'. It makes a very strong point, and like so many narratives in the bible it could have been better constructed, perfected and polished if it were just a story. What we know of historical Herod's character, what science helps us understand of the skies, and what Matthew knew of the Magi seems to be quite real. As does the method of their departure once they have seen Jesus..

They come, they see Jesus, they go in silence and into the darkness. This is fitting. Matthew has his focus unswervingly on the Lord, and once the Magi have paid their tribute they leave the story. Matthew is too good a narrator to let himself be distracted by what happened subsequently to the Kings. Quite possibly he simply does not know.

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<sup>1</sup> from which we derive the word Magician

<sup>2</sup> including Emeritus Pope Benedict the 14th, Pope Benedict XVI, Jesus of Nazareth, the Infancy Narratives. P 98-99.

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But that last line of the Gospel that we hear today '*they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way*' is intriguing, not just historically or narratively or as a collection of interesting facts but personally. The Magi are told not to go back because that would put the king they seek to honour in danger: it should speak to us today. '*Do not go back*' is a warning for us these twelve days after Christmas. You have seen the one you came to honour. Do not now go back home the way you came, by way of Herod. Do not return, through the power and dominion of the world which Herod represents. Do not go back home in the same way you have come, thereby putting all you have received in peril. Take the path He – Jesus - leads you and go in peace,

I am not a king or a wiseman or a magi, but I do know that the story about them is told for me, not so that I may think what a nice Christmas story it all is, but to tell me that I still have something to learn about God; there is something He has shown me; and something He still wishes me to see. And so, I am still following that star.