



by Mary M. McGlone

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If you think that hearing another part of the Christmas story as late as January 8 is stretching it out too much, just imagine what those Magi felt as they trudged through the desert toward Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. Their trek probably lasted even longer than the commercial Christmas season. Matthew then took their story and fashioned it as a subtle summary of the entire Gospel message. All we have to do is decode it a little.

First, while Matthew explains that Jesus came from good Jewish stock, he makes it equally clear that God isn't into racial purity. Besides Mary, there are four women mentioned in Jesus' genealogy, each of them a foreigner; collaboration with God's plan was not limited by the bloodlines of the chosen people. In fact, Joseph's acceptance of the pregnant Mary and Herod's use of Scripture to further his plan to harm the infant Jesus demonstrate that scrupulous adherence to law and belief in messianic prophecies don't necessarily prove faithfulness to God. Now we see that in Matthew's Gospel the first people to give homage to Jesus were probably Arabs, "pagans" who learned from nature rather than Scripture that God was up to something in their day.

These pilgrims fit the description of "God fearers." They were people looking for more, who believed in signs indicating that God was involved in human history. They

were also ready to go a distance to see.

The Magi followed a star, a sign in their own tradition, but they didn't limit themselves to their own religious background. Upon arriving to Jerusalem, they sought counsel from the faith of the people of that place. When "they sought diligently," Jewish wisdom together with their own tradition led them to the child. Matthew records no commentary about the family's modest setting, but only says that they saw the child and prostrated themselves in homage. Then, adding practical content to their religious sentiment, they "opened their treasures" and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We might say they worshiped in word and deed.

We picture them as three because of the three gifts that are named. In reality, they could have been two or ten or more; they could have been a retinue including women and children. But what's important about them is what they have to tell us about seeking and finding, about worship that has integrity.

Without mentioning the Magi, St. Augustine reflected on how human nature was created with a thirst for the divine: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." The Magi were people gifted with what Augustine might have called the grace of holy restlessness. Apparently well-to-do enough to take a long journey and arrive with expensive gifts, they set off with enough interior freedom to be responsive to the Spirit who urged them to look for more than they already had and knew.

We use the story of the Magi's seeking and finding as the frame for our feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of God's self-revelation. The combination of this story and the meaning of the feast make a subtle theological statement intimating that only those who are willing to go a distance in their seeking will discover God's self-manifestation. We might look to e e cummings for light on the mystery of the Epiphany journey. In his poem "somewhere i have never travelled" he writes:

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond

any experience, your eyes have their silence:

in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,

or which i cannot touch because they are too near

That's an ode to the beloved. At the same time, perhaps unintentionally, Cummings' poetry suggests an insight into what it meant to gaze on the Christ Child; it's meditation on the dance between humans and the God who lures us to share divine life. When the Magi encountered the babe they had indeed traveled beyond any experience and found great power in frailty.

Today is a good day for poetry, the sort of reading that demands both quiet contemplation and the restlessness of spirit that opens us to what lies beyond anything we already understand. The journey of the Magi is a reminder that the pilgrimage toward God is long. As the Magi seeking a king found a poor child, our journey will surprise us as well. In telling of the Magi, strangers to the traditions of Israel, Matthew intended to shake us out of our ethnocentrism and facile assumptions about other people's beliefs and our own as well.

The story of the star leading to Bethlehem's child is one more rendition of God's gentle yet unrelenting overtures to humanity. In the effort to draw us close, God will use anything from stars and prophecies to poetry or restlessness. If we are open to the grace of seeing, anything and everything can be an epiphany.

### **Isaiah 60:1-6**

The feast of the Epiphany ends the Christmas season and offers us a thematic orientation to the coming year. As we celebrate God's self-manifestation to the world through the eyes of the Arabs who came seeking the Christ Child, we are reminded of the great themes of God's constant presence in history, the universality of salvation, and our call to seek the face of God and work to create worldwide solidarity.

Our reading from Isaiah 60 prepares the way for the story of the Magi. Most obviously it speaks of the foreigners who will come to worship in Jerusalem (giving us the crèche-set image of their camels) and even mentions two of the three gifts they gave the child. In addition, Isaiah's symbolism of light finds its equivalent in the star that guided the pilgrims. As in so many cases of the Christian Scripture's use of Hebrew Scripture, Matthew affirmed that Isaiah had predicted what would happen, and he used the prophecy to frame his story about Jesus.

In its own context this passage from "Third Isaiah" is a call to the people who have returned from exile to recognize the wonders God is doing in their midst. As always,

it insists that the glory of Israel comes from God but depends on the response of the people. Thus, the command to “Rise up!” is a wake-up call to folks who have become quite good at taking account of how bad things are. Sure, darkness covers the earth and people’s perception seems hopelessly cloudy, but those circumstances are nothing in the light of what God can do with them if they will only open their eyes.

As we hear this reading in the opening days of the new year, it should wake us up as well. It’s far too easy to concentrate on the darkness of the world situation. But God’s command is “Rise up in splendor” because the light of the world has come. Scripture scholar John Osvalt, in his commentary on Isaiah chapters 40-66, points out that Isaiah uses the “prophetic perfect” tense when saying that Jerusalem’s light has come. In other words, although the people may not perceive it right now, the prophet is so certain that God’s glory will appear that he can say it has arrived. The prophet knows God’s love, and therefore doubt about the future is impossible: God’s light will shine.

When Isaiah proclaims, “Rise up!” the prophet is saying that weariness, sadness and mourning are an indulgence the people of God can no longer afford. The task now is to open our eyes to the Lord’s light. In the light of recognizing God’s presence, we will find the energy and inspiration we need. With all the assurance of “seek and ye shall find,” the prophet says God’s self-revelation is here for the seeing. This is the time of epiphany, and the more we recognize it the more we will reflect its light for the nations.

### **Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6**

The author who wrote to the Ephesians in Paul’s name certainly picked up on one of Paul’s favorite themes in this passage. His insistence on the equality of Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ expressed the universal character of the community founded in the name of Christ. In the selection we hear today the author whom we can call “Paul” defends his source of authority before he states his major point. This explanation not only establishes Paul’s authority, but also gives us a sense of the scope of his apostolic ministry.

Paul speaks of his “stewardship” of God’s grace. The word he uses is related to the English word economy; its etymology includes *oikos* of a home atmosphere and *nomos* meaning law. The idea of the word is that Paul has been given responsibility

for God's grace poured out for the people. That is his ministry: making God's grace available by preaching it in a convincing way.

Secondly, in spite of the communal tradition of having one member transmit the faith to another, Paul speaks of having received this particular revelation directly from God. Just as he was chosen by God and thus ultimately responsible only to God, so too, the revelation he received depends not on human opinion; it is new, and springs from a deeper authority.

With all of that said, Paul finally articulates the mystery itself: "the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise of Christ Jesus." Paul's writing, both what came authentically from his hand and that written in his name, will insist on this as one of his principal teachings. In fact, the unity of all who believe in Christ is a key to Paul's mission as the person God chose to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

As we celebrate the Epiphany, this reading reminds us that by calling ourselves Catholic we recognize that we are part of a community that extends across the globe. Surrounded by ethnocentrism and nationalism, this is a call to keep a world map across from our mirror so that we cannot see ourselves except in the context of the whole world.

Once awareness of unity begins to permeate our consciousness we can move on to the challenge of being "copartners" in Christ Jesus. One of the best descriptions we have of that is the famous opening statement of *Gaudium et Spes*, the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" from Vatican II. There we read: "*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.*"

One way of understanding and celebrating the feast of the Epiphany is to make it a celebration of our catholicity, the universality not only of our faith, but specifically of our solidarity as copartners in Christ. This feast comes ten days before we begin our annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year's theme comes from paragraph 9 of *The Joy of the Gospel* where Pope Francis writes: "If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good ... 'The love of Christ urges us,' (2 Cor 5:14); 'Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel' (1 Cor 9:16)." Today's reading from Ephesians reminds us that we are coheirs and

copartners, impelled to make good on the promise of the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

## **Matthew 2:1-12**

Matthew, whose Gospel will be the principal one we hear this year, wrote with an eye to showing the connection between the faith of Christians and the history of Israel. As he continually makes that connection, Matthew also stretches his readers to see beyond the experience of one tradition and realize that the Gospel message is directed to all people, no matter their heritage or history. Matthew and Luke wrote their infancy narratives as something like a musical overture; the stories introduce the main themes of the narrative to come. Knowing that, we can read the story of the Magi not only for the details it presents, but also for how it sets us on the journey of knowing Jesus through the eyes of his servant whom we call Matthew.

Sister Diane Bergant (*Preaching the New Lectionary*) explains that the story of the Magi is a *haggadah*, a tale fashioned to make a theological point. That does not mean that it did not happen; in fact, Magi-style travelers were not unusual and astronomers say there was an extraordinary astral happening in those days. The point is that Matthew wove this story to underline important dimensions of his Gospel. He tells us that the first people to do homage to the Savior sent to Israel were pagan foreigners. He lets us know that God's chosen one would be a threat to people in power. As the story goes on and Joseph takes the family to Egypt, Matthew assures us that the most powerful enemies in the world cannot stop God's saving plan.

This is our last Christmas story of the season. Celebrating God's self-revelation to the nations, it caps the meaning of the season. Combined with our readings from Isaiah and Paul, Matthew's narrative orients us to a new year of seeking the signs of God's presence in the everyday circumstances of our world. It calls us to hope, and reminds us that we are promised that if we seek we will find God, although rarely in the ways we would expect. As we begin this year, let us heed Isaiah's call to rise up because the glory of the Lord is truly to be found among us.

## **Planning: Epiphany**

By: Lawrence Mick

Today we celebrate Epiphany, a feast whose name is a Greek word meaning a manifestation or revelation. Our first question might be just what is revealed as we celebrate today. We often think of this feast as focused on the manifestation of the Christ Child to the world, and this is certainly a valid perspective. However, we might also think of it as a revelation of the plan of God for the salvation of the world, including not only Jews but also all the Gentile nations of the world. Today's second reading from Ephesians clearly states: "as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

So Epiphany is not just about three Wise Men finding their way to Bethlehem. They represent all the nations of the earth, just as the shepherds represent the Jewish people in Luke's nativity story.

This is a feast that calls us once again to embrace a global worldview. This is always a challenge, since we tend to think much more narrowly, staying concerned with our own family, neighborhood, city or country. Yet God's love extends to all people and all creation, and we are called to embrace God's view and God's universal love.

There is a question, though, about how we approach this theme. It is easy to present it as a moral demand that is hard to meet. Perhaps none of us is ever able to embrace fully the scope of God's love; we are not God! But we are called to keep striving to broaden our vision and our hearts.

It may be more effective, though, to focus on the positive. Let this feast be a day to celebrate the richness of our church, both worldwide and local. Give thanks for the various gifts that we have received from members of our faith community who come from other nations and other cultures. Accentuate the gifts brought to your local community by such members, but also include the gifts contributed to the whole church around the world. Remember the words of Pope Paul VI, who invited the people of Africa to "share their gift of Blackness" with the whole Church.

## **Prayers: Epiphany**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

We live in a world that tends to segregate people along many lines, especially the weak from the powerful. This Christmas season and today's feast remind us that God's revelation is for all people and that Jesus was sent for all. God's will for the

human race is unity—that all may be one. This vision is yet to be achieved, and there are those still threatened by it. But today we are called to walk in the light of this truth and to ask: From whom are we still separated? What are we called do to bridge this chasm?

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you came to those considered least among others: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you showed yourself also to the powerful and mighty: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you came as gift to all who are open to you: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** As a people who walk in the light, we pray for our needs and for those of the whole world.

**Minister** For the church: that it may be a sign of unity for all people ... we pray,

- For peace among all nations and all people, regardless of their differences ... we pray,
- For those who still suffer at the hands of those with power ... we pray,
- For those who worship God under other names or through other religious traditions ... we pray,
- For those who use power to subjugate the weak, the poor and the disenfranchised ... we pray,
- For those who still have not heard the good news of Jesus' coming for all people ... we pray,
- For newly elected leaders and for cooperation among those with differing views ... we pray,
- For those among us who are suffering, who feel oppressed or inferior ... we pray,
- For the sick, the dying and those who care for them; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

**Presider** Gracious God, you love all nations and peoples of the earth, and you sent Jesus for all of us. Show us how to extend our love to others, especially those who appear to be different from us. Give us the courage to advocate on behalf of inclusion and to lift up those who are regarded as insignificant. We ask this in the



name of Jesus, the light of all nations. Amen.

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