

The Epiphany of the Lord

One cartoon shows the three kings arriving at the stable in Bethlehem. Jesus perks up at the shiny objects they carry. One of the kings pauses a moment, hugs his gift, and explains to the infant, “Um, look, these are for Christmas *and* for your birthday.”

The magi are the centermost figures of Epiphany. In many churches such as ours, when we set up the manger scene on one side of the sanctuary at Christmas, we keep the magi and their camels at the other side because they’re still on the way. Today their statues finally arrive at the manger, gifts in hand.

For many people the second reading for Epiphany is a head-scratcher. The first reading prophesies caravans of camels and gifts of gold and frankincense—easy enough to figure that out. Even today’s psalm concerns kings coming from afar to offer gifts. But for the second reading the lectionary gives us a few verses from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, where he mentions no camels, no kings, and no gifts. Paul declares something else: “the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”

The significance of the magi is not what they gave but where they’re from. Matthew simply identifies their origin as “from the east.” He implies they’re not Jewish, as the members of the Holy Family were. The magi were Gentiles, outsiders. Something in the sky moved them, emotionally and physically. They found its source in the infant Jesus. There at the manger, foreshadowing his long-lasting impact, Jesus united Jew and Gentile.

Nearly every human birth has the power to unify factions. Members of the family who don’t get along are captivated by a newborn baby. Its helplessness unites the protective yearnings of every human heart. We see this in the hearts of the shepherds and the magi, the Jews and the Gentiles who all found Christ.

St. Paul sounds a bit boastful when he tells the Ephesians that the mystery of God “was not made known to people in other generations,” but “it was given to me for your benefit.” No one else could figure out the significance of God’s plan, but Paul personally received a revelation explaining it all, and he shared it with the world. We meditate today on Paul’s insight: beyond the camels, the kings and the gifts, all of us are one in Christ Jesus. Ukrainians and Russians, Palestinians and Israelis, Democrats and Republicans—this child was born for all of us. He shows us the way to peace if we would only seek him and follow his star.

The magi did something more in the presence of the infant Jesus: The gospel says, “They prostrated themselves and did him homage.” The same Jesus is truly present to us under the forms of bread and wine. This real presence endures in the consecrated hosts we reserve in the tabernacle. Like the magi, we can give Christ the best of gifts—the gift of ourselves, especially when we make the journey to adore him present in the Blessed Sacrament and pay him homage, notably in this year of eucharistic revival.

Wherever we experience disparity or disagreement in our lives, we can find unity if we imitate the magi not only in giving gifts but in adoring the real presence of Jesus Christ.

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