

Homily, Epiphany, St Bartholomew's (4 Jan. 2026)

I. Epiphany marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas, even though for most people Christmas lasts only one day. Indeed, in the Eastern and Greek Orthodox traditions, Epiphany is the day when they actually celebrate Christmas, 6th January. We are a couple of days ahead of that date but it gives us a wonderful opportunity to reflect on Epiphany and what it means as we celebrate the nativity of the Lord.

The word “epiphany” means simply a revelation, a manifestation, a showing forth of the true meaning of something heavenly, something from God. As in our Isaiah reading: *the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you*. That describes an epiphany, the appearance of the Lord.

In the early church there were three events that were seen as part of that revelation, three events in Jesus' life at this time of the year. The first is the coming of the wise men to the infant Jesus. The second is the baptism of Jesus which we celebrate next Sunday, and the third is the wedding at Cana from John's Gospel. These three are seen as the “three miracle occurring at the same time of the year, which represent the epiphany of God in Jesus.

II. Our focus today is on the first of these: Matthew's story of the coming of the magi or wise men. They are Gentiles who come from outside Judaism, and they are astrologers – that is, they study the stars and see human destiny as related to the movement of planets. The horoscope would have been part of their tool kit.

These days astrology is not regarded as part of science. Indeed, it's seen as a kind of pseudoscience, especially the horoscope. The real scientific study of the stars is, of course, astronomy. But the ancient world took astrology very seriously. They believed that the whole universe was somehow inter-connected, so that what happened in the heavens could affect what happened on earth. The wise men in our story see the appearance of a new planet or a comet rising in the east as the sign of the birth of a new King. And they are convinced enough to travel all the way to the land of Judaea in order to pay homage to this new ruler whose birth the planets have predicted.

Of course we know the consequence of the coming of the wise men: the paranoia of King Herod when the wise men approach him, the flight of the holy family into Egypt as asylum seekers, the massacre of the baby boys in Bethlehem, and the surreptitious departure of the wise men to avoid Herod.

III. The coming of the magi is of great significance for Matthew, as well as for later traditions in the church. They are Gentiles and signify that the good news of Jesus will go out into all the world. It will not just be for the insiders but for those beyond the covenant community. Our reading from Ephesians speaks of the mystery hidden for ages in God, which is now revealed: the entry of the Gentiles into God's covenant love, so that they too, the outsiders, are now welcomed as people of God alongside the Jewish people.

At the same time the wise men and the star they follow represent a challenge to the powers and rulers of this world. In good faith they approach Herod and he deceives them, concerned only with protecting his own power. Though they manage to evade him in the end, the story shows what political power can sometimes be like: how it can protect itself and its own status while inflicting great damage and harm on its people. This I think is something that we can still see in the world today.

And finally this story is a cause for joy. The one place of light and joy in Matthew's story is the moment when the magi reach the place where the star stops and find there the infant Jesus with his mother Mary. Matthew tells us that ‘they rejoiced with great joy’ and they worshipped him, recognising that this was God in their midst.

IV. Later tradition tells us that there were three magi, although in fact Matthew never gives their number. It's simply that they offer three costly gifts. And that same tradition also gives us their names: Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. Melchior is said to be from Persia and brings gold, symbolising Jesus as King. Caspar is from India and brings frankincense, signifying Jesus' divinity. And Balthazar is from Arabia and brings myrrh, representing Jesus' death and his resurrection. All are Gentiles, from different nations, revealing the inclusive love of God.

The traditional practice has been for people to chalk the initials of the wise men on their front door on the evening of 5 January, hoping that they would come and bless their abode. The initials of their name (C M B) also stand for 'May Christ bless this house.'

None of this of course is in Matthew's Gospel, but it represents an authentic, imaginative extension of what we find in this Epiphany story.

V. We too are called to take our place before this holy mystery: this Epiphany; the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary with her divine Child in her arms. We are welcomed to enter into the response of the magi and be filled with the joy of God becoming one of us: sharing our life from birth to death, descending into our darkness and brokenness to bring us light and healing

Today I invite you on Epiphany Eve on 5 January to take home some chalk with you which we will now bless, and write these figures on the door of your house. When you do so, you are inviting Christ to bless your house, to bless those who live in it and those who come to visit. And the greatest blessing of Epiphany is that of Mary and her son whose presence is always with us in our hearts and our homes to bless our lives: our going out and our coming in.

Mthr Dorothy