

Epiphany: January 6th 2022
“Wise Identification”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The word we translate “wise men” is Magi. It is related to our word magician. It could mean astrologers, that is, those who believed the stars and planets controlled fate. It could mean sorcerers. It could mean scientists or astronomers. In fact, the lines between scientist and alchemist or sorcerer were blurred in the ancient world. Wise men sounds nicer; but if we wanted to be the most accurate, we would probably say *scholar*. We don’t know a lot about them, most of what we hear is educated speculation and theological thought. More than likely, they were Persians from Babylon. The Persians, like the Egyptians, blurred the line between royalty and divinity. This also helps to confuse things.

Whoever these guys were, they saw some astrological sign, an alignment of planets or a star or a meteor shower, and somehow connected it with Israel. They then interpreted it to mean that a new Divine being had been born on earth as king. One possibility is that they had some revelation we don’t, some inspired word from Daniel that predicted these things or even some special revelation given directly to them, much like Joseph’s dreams.

While this can lead us into all sorts of tangential places, the gifts they bring are most interesting. If they were Persian astrologers who interpreted the stars to mean a new Divine King was born in Israel, this means they brought gifts as tribute. This would be an action that showed their submission to the new king where they would live and serve at the king’s pleasure. This could be a reasonable argument based on what we know about the Persians; except for one well-known fact – the ancient people were casually racist. Persians worshiped their own kings. They didn’t worship kings of other people, because they just assumed they were superior.

This always cracks me up with the modern take on Native Americans. What do you think they meant by calling themselves “the people?” Is this not also a racist statement? Any group of people that identify themselves with the moniker of “the” clearly states that everyone not of their group is not part of THE GROUP. If one divides based upon race, on any side, they are racists.

Truthfully, I don't think you can find a non-racist people in the ancient world. They all assumed they were superior to other people. The Native Americans figured they were closer to the land and therefore to the gods. They were in harmony with the earth. Other tribes and races weren't. Other tribes and races were inferior. It is simply old-fashioned paganism. A common theme that runs through all pagans is fertility stuff. Some groups that are agriculturally-based is not always readily clear, but it is still about fertility. It's about getting food and the stuff we need for life and trying to fit into the rhythm of life and death.

Of course, Hollywood is moved by this and thinks it is profound. This too is no surprise. Because fallen men have always found this profound. Fallen men are incredibly similar in their desires and fears. It is kind of like when one culture or another brags about drinking massive quantities. I've got a little secret for you: The Germans, the Irish, the Poles, the Japanese, the Arabs, the Ethiopians, and the Mexicans are all great drunks. Everyone is. It is a universal problem.

Back to the Magi, these ancient scholars, Persian astrologers are not going to see divinity in other people's kings; they certainly aren't going to worship a Hebrew or bring Him tribute. Besides that, it would be strange for astrology to lead to this sort of coincidence anyway. How many times did Persians show up to worship some kid who wasn't the Messiah? No idea, so we find the gifts most likely are not a tribute.

So, what are they? I have heard it said they could have been something like gifts given at a baby shower. In other words, the gifts were given in the name of the Baby Jesus, but they were given to Mary and Joseph. The expectation was that the parents would use the gifts for the good of the child. In this case, they would have used them to fund their trip to Egypt. If this is the case, then the character of the gifts is probably symbolic of Our Lord's three-fold office. The gold is in recognition that He is the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. The Frankincense relates to His priestly office, that He hears and answers prayers. And the myrrh somehow reflects His prophetic role. I guess because it is bitter. I have said this many times, and this certainly conforms to the Holy Scriptures; although, the more thought I give it, Frankincense and Myrrh would both readily speak to the priestly office, which leaves the prophetic office a bit of a stretch.

I think, however, that there is a better explanation. These wise men are truly and deeply wise and these gifts are directly related to Our Lord's burial. If this is the case, then they are most unlike Peter whose fallen flesh once caused him to try and deny Our Lord's death. Immediately upon St. Peter's God-given confession that Jesus is the Christ, he was told that it is necessary for the Christ to be sacrificed. Then St. Peter, in his weakness, tried to stop the Lord from going to Jerusalem. Our Lord responded by calling St. Peter *Satan*; who is the only one who rightly wants to keep Jesus from the cross. We don't. We need Him to be sacrificed. Because if He isn't, not only are we damned, but so are our children. Peter was wrong. Our Lord was not unduly harsh. To keep Jesus from the cross is an absolutely satanic impulse. The death of Jesus Christ does not make the holy angels or the saints in heaven sad. They love it. They rejoice in it. They know and confess that it is good, that this is God's will.

So, it could well be that armed with the prophecies of Daniel, Moses, and Isaiah, and maybe even some Word we haven't been given, the wise men recognized Jesus as the Sacrifice and gave Mary gifts for His burial. If so, this means they rejoiced in Jesus' death. He was probably a toddler at this point, running around, laughing. And they bow down and say, "Won't it be great when you're tortured and killed?" They are eager for it. Strange, I know; but profoundly true. If this is the case, then their piety moves them to give from themselves for the work of the Church, to aid Mary in the burial, not as mourners, but as forgiven penitents. They aren't paying tribute or giving baby shower gifts. They're simply responding to the true character and purpose of the Messiah and seeing the need—they provide. In other words, they are living in faith within their vocations – maybe they are Lutheran after all!

If that is the case, it is not only deeply profound and pious, it is also a remarkable example of how charity works in the Church. Mary needs to bury Our Lord. There is a prophecy about His being joined in death to the rich. So, she needs some cash and some costly spices. They gladly provide it. I don't think this is that different than seeing that the Church needs this, that, or the other thing, and going and getting one, or putting money in the plate, so that the church building can not only give witness to God's gracious presence, like the altar's being erected by Abraham everywhere he went, but it also allows for the pastor to be able to devote himself to

preaching, teaching, and visiting. In other words, I think this is precisely what faith does.

Who knows, maybe the wise men weren't that wise. Maybe they didn't fully and perfectly understand exactly what they were doing. Maybe it was complicated, and sometimes part of them knew, sometimes they forgot, sometimes they got mad, sometimes they cried, sometimes they were afraid, and sometimes they were just full of joy and thrilled to be a part of it all. Maybe they just knew that Jesus was the Messiah, God in our Flesh anointed by His Father to be Our Savior, and didn't fully get how painful or terrible it would be. Maybe they simply trusted that God would provide for them through that Messiah, so they came to worship Him. Maybe their gifts did more good and showed more things than they consciously knew.

If so, you are in good company. You may not always be fully aware of exactly what is happening in the Service. You may not know what every passage means. You may not always pay attention during the sermon. You might not plan your gifts but just reach into your pocket and pull out a dollar when you walk by the plate. You may sometimes doubt, be angry, sad, lonely, lustful, tired, or frustrated; but the Lord continues to provide and continues to work through you.

You may not always be wise, but God is. Your parents may not have known the full depth of what they were doing when they brought you to be baptized. The Lord knew what He was doing. The One who sent the Messiah, sent the star and prodded the wise men along; He does the same for you – whether you fully recognize it or not. He has drowned you in the font and resurrected you in new life. He has given you daily bread for your body and for your soul. He feeds you with His own body and blood covering your sins. We may not know all the time what is truly happening in these moments, we may often overlook the greatness of these moments, but God Himself knows the depth of the mysteries. We don't have to be scholars and guess. The Epiphany shines light on the truth we need to know – Jesus Christ is the savior of all nations, all sinners, Jews and Gentiles = and that is what makes one truly wise. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of the Church
The Epiphany of Our Lord
6 January 2022**

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

From afar, You brought the Magi safely to find Christ and then safely home again. Send Your holy angels before all who travel, that they would be directed always in the ways of Christ. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of glory, even as darkness covers our world, You make Your Church to shine with the brightness of the resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us His light in rich measure, that the world would be drawn to behold His salvation. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy Father, as Your Son was once found in the arms of the Virgin Mary, so now is He found in Your Holy Christian Church. Cause Your Word to abide richly among us, that many would be led to Christ through our witness. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, You have appointed pastors to make known the mystery of Your grace. Grant them the boldness of St. Paul to speak what You have revealed to them in Your Word, that we would worthily partake of all Your gifts. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You prepared a place for Your Son, Jesus, in the womb of the Virgin Mary and in the home of Mary and Joseph. Bless our homes and all who dwell in them, that Your Word would be heard and Your mercy be shown therein. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord God, all nations are called to worship You in the brightness of Your Son. Grant faithfulness to President Biden and Governor Reynolds and all the rulers of our nation. Scatter the darkness of this world through the faithful witness of Your Church. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Compassionate Lord, behold in mercy all who are in any danger, trouble, sickness or need. Hear our prayers for the sick and suffering [*especially Carmen, Marvin, Pam, Zoey, Tricia, and those we name in our hearts*]. Comfort all who mourn and sustain them with a confident hope in the resurrection. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You brought the Magi of old to worship Your Son, Jesus, and so You have brought us to worship Him also. Receive our gifts and give us Jesus in His body and blood, that we may return home according to Your holy way. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**