

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

Thank God for those three kings! For those of us who can't bear to see the holidays end and chronically have a hard time taking down the Christmas tree each year, the Feast of the Epiphany supplies one more excuse to keep the holiday spirit going. As we know, the Magi famously bring gifts, and they also bring their homage. But perhaps the most important thing they bring, as far as our liturgical year is concerned, is one more reason to keep the party going.

It's no wonder that Epiphany feels like the last gasp of the Christmas holiday. Technically speaking, Epiphany used to *be* Christmas to half of the known Church, and the two celebrations share a common beginning. Our current feast of Christmas was celebrated as a Christian response to the pagan rituals of the winter solstice observed since the third century on December 25. As the empire worshipped the "invincible sun god" of winter's dying light, Christians adored the "invincible Son of God" who brings light to the "people who walk in darkness." But that was true only according to the calendar of the West; in the East, the solstice was celebrated on January 6. And so two "Christmases" arose in the early Church, lending us the "12 days of Christmas" we now know.

And what was commemorated on this Christian solstice, East and West, on either date? It varied from one community to another. Some honored the Incarnation of Jesus in the Nativity; others proclaimed the revelation of Jesus as God's son in his Baptism; still others celebrated the arrival of the Magi.

They acknowledged Jesus as literally the "King of Kings"; while some preferred to recall the miracle of the water-made-wine at the wedding feast at Cana through which Jesus revealed the first sign of his divinity. It wasn't until the fourth century that December 25, regularized as the Feast of the Nativity in the West, was also adopted in the East. At that time, the East claimed January 6 as the Feast of the Epiphany, most frequently celebrating what we now call the Baptism of the Lord on that date. By the fifth century, the West claimed January 6 for Epiphany as well, preferring to honor the arrival of the Magi on that day.

Yet Armenian rite churches today still celebrate Christ's Nativity on January 6. The scrambled roots of this feast are hardly untied. But why should we untie them? Are you totally confused yet?

Why not acknowledge what the early Church perceived: that all of these events speak of one and the same revelation? These four feasts -- Nativity, the coming of the Magi, the Baptism of the Lord (which we celebrate next Sunday), and the miracle at Cana (which we celebrate the week after that) -- are *all Epiphanies*; that is, they all manifest the eternal and ongoing presence of God in our midst. God chooses to be known to us as the Word-made-flesh of Jesus born in Bethlehem. The divine is revealed before the nations symbolically in the visitation of foreign wise men bearing gifts. A voice from heaven claims Jesus as the divine Son at his Baptism. And the power of heaven is manifested by Jesus in the water-made-wine of his first miracle. All four events speak of the same extraordinary truth!

If we learn nothing else from the Church's early scramble to define one precise experience as "epiphany," it's that there are lots to choose from. God is always lifting the veil between heaven and earth and affording us a look-see! We have this hour of celebrating the Mass in Word and Sacrament; the rare but palpable experience of being "met" in our prayer; the very real miracles of healing and forgiveness and compassion; you can probably add more. The wise men brought three gifts, but Epiphany brings multitudes. God *wants* to be known to us. Look! Listen! And celebrate.

Jesus came to save all people. The Magi found him. They represent the revelation of Jesus to all peoples everywhere for all generations to come. So like those wise kings who followed the star until they could kneel and do homage to a greater King, we, too, need to travel our lives' journey wisely to find Jesus' presence. Every day we should be moving closer to finding how Jesus continues to reveal himself to us in our lives. And like the Magi, we need to share that presence with others as we continue our life's journey.

The Greek word "magi" meant scientists from the east, despite translated as "astrologers." Because they could study and predict the movement of

heavenly bodies, they were thought to be magicians, where the word "magic" comes from. Matthew included the magi in his Gospel account to show that Jesus was born to bring salvation to all: Gentiles as well as Jews.

The Church celebrates Epiphany to tell the world that no one who humbles himself before Jesus, paying homage to His divine-and-human presence, is excluded from the kingdom of God. Christ is the way, the truth and the life. No one can have eternal life without Him, but all are welcome.

Contrary to popular legends, the magi were not kings, even though post-biblical writings often referred to them as kings because of the royal gifts they brought. It's not their kingship that the gifts represent; it's the Messianic kingship of Jesus. The magi prophetically testified with these gifts that Jesus was a divine king who would die. Gold honored Jesus as king, incense honored His divinity, and myrrh, which was used in preparing the dead for burial, honored His death. Eventually, the gifts also came to symbolize our Christian response: gold for our righteousness, incense our prayers, and myrrh our sufferings for Christ.

The word "epiphany" means a moment of discovery, a revelation that changes our lives. Did the magi recognize the baby Jesus as the world's savior? It was a common belief at the time that all kings were divine -- they were gods living among us until they died. Did the magi have an epiphany about the permanent kingship of Jesus?

Surely after this pilgrimage they never forgot about Him and they kept their ears open for news from Jerusalem about Him. Surely they learned about the King of the Jews who was crucified. We know this, because at some point, they became very saintly Christians; their relics still exist and have been venerated since very early times. Without a doubt, the magi worshiped Jesus, even if they didn't fully understand why until later. Have you had an epiphany during a time of suffering? How did it increase your righteousness? How did it affect your prayer life? These are your royal gifts for Jesus! AMEN!