

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

How far will YOU go?

The Feast of the Epiphany shows the fullness of the revelation not only to the Jews, but to the non-Jews, the Gentiles and to all the nations. We see not only our journey to God, but the great journey of God to us. The humility by and the great lengths which Jesus has taken to come to be among us and to show Himself to us, and the great lengths He will continue to take in His three years of public ministry which will lead to His passion, death and Resurrection. Of course, He is most near to us in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

As we see the greatness of Jesus' journey to us, as we reflect on the greatness of the journey of the Magi, what are the ways that the Holy Spirit is moving US to continue OUR great journey, in this life and the life to come? What gifts do WE bring this day to the stable and place before the Lord and King? Let us bring the gold of our material wealth and physical possessions; the incense of those Spirit-moments and God-moments of our lives; the myrrh, the funeral oils of our suffering and pain, and lay it before the Lord. How far will YOU go?

GPS (global positioning system) technology. It is very handy, powering maps on our phones that help us find our destinations. GPS guides you there -- just like Magi following a star. You don't even have to tell it where you are -- it knows! And if you make a wrong turn, it tells you so and recalculates its directions accordingly. Wouldn't it be great to have a GPS not only for our travels but also for our life choices? Destination: a long and prosperous life. Directions: anybody's guess. That's the problem. There is no set path that guarantees such an outcome. Do what you will, you can't avoid suffering and death.

But all is not lost. The Good News that comes with the birth of Jesus is that there is a path you can take that will guarantee you great joy and everlasting life. Yes, we will suffer at times and eventually we all will die, but our lives will have meaning because we will have lived it for the sake of others. We will find immense happiness in sharing our gifts and recognizing the talents of others.

You will feel overwhelming gratitude for the many blessings showered upon you. And believe me, when you count them, they are many.

You find this path by following your EPS -- eternal positioning system -- activated at your Baptism. The simple directions you receive are these: love, forgive, serve.

When the ancient prophets had visions of change, some predictions were terrifying but others were downright grand. In today's First Reading, Isaiah imagines that Israel, so long a backwater of the civilized world, would someday be an international destination. The riches that were so often carried out of its pillaged cities would one day return on caravans of camels. Its kings had been dragged from Jerusalem in chains into exile. But one day foreign kings would walk to Jerusalem, dazzled by the capital's radiance.

By the way, the difference between a camel and a dromedary is that a camel has one hump on its back, and a dromedary has two. That's why to this day, in the Middle East, when you go to rent a camel, the salesman will ask you, "One hump or two?" (Smiles and groans from the congregation.)

Today's Responsorial Psalm echoes the sentiment in imagining kings of Tarshish and the Isles, Arabia and Seba -- lords of elsewhere north, south, and west -- paying tribute to Israel. If the biblical history of Solomon is to be believed, Israel enjoyed at least one hour of greatness that brought rulers from as far as Sheba to pay honor. So for the nation's seers, it was not impossible to conceive that Israel might one day recover that prestige.

The Magi -- were they wise men, astrologers, magicians, priests, royalty? Who knows what the Magi were? Raymond Arroyo, in his most recent book, "Wise Men Who Found Christmas," says that the astrologers did not come from the East, as our Gospel story says, but from the north, from Persia. They dabbled in astrology, magic (that's where we get the term "Magi" from) and theology. They interpreted dreams and came from the royal class, hence the name "We Three Kings." They may have only been foreign ambassadors.

We know that dealers in wonder are a mixed bag in the Bible. Some operate under divine authority and others dabbled in the occult. Still others were

simply charlatans and rip-off artists. But if there can be good thieves, good tax collectors like Matthew, and converted Pharisees like Paul, we have to admit that categories can be deceiving in the Gospels. If the Magi were occult leaders, they were also reliable ones.

How did the proverbial “wise men” become wise? How have you acquired wisdom in your life? Someone joked that wisdom is the sum total of the lessons we learn in life just AFTER we could have used the information! What experiences, painful or otherwise, have taught you the most? How do you incorporate your hard-won wisdom into your day-to-day living?

What makes the Magi reliable is that they do not undertake their journey under their own will or their own modest powers. They are led: first by a star and later by a dream. This willingness to be taken by the Hand of Heaven and guided along the way is a sign of deep humility and a hearty amount of trust in a Higher Power. They clearly did not know the God who compelled their journey or their worship. Yet like children, they fell in behind the leadership of the star and went.

From whom are we most likely to take directions? Do worldly powers impress us enough to derail our path? Do we pledge allegiance only to our own authority, our own opinions, or our own will? Most of all, are we willing to take the journey of faith, an enterprise that requires us by definition to surrender, to change, and to grow? Are we willing to be led along a path we cannot predestine or control, toward a goal we only vaguely apprehend? Wise men still seek Him!

Raymond Arroyo says that the area in Persia and the city in which the Wise Men lived, Petra, were great producers and sellers of gold, incense and myrrh. This is probably why the Three Wise Men brought these to Baby Jesus.

We too must bring our gold. A king's crown is usually made of gold. Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. When gold is polished, it is possible to see one's reflection in this fine metal.

On our pilgrimage to meet Christ, we must bring self-knowledge as creatures before God, incomplete before the Creator of the cosmos.

We too must bring our frankincense. Frankincense is burned, producing the most pleasing of odors. It is usually offered to honor the Divine, to honor God.

Jesus is truly God and truly human. We must come to Christ as those whose very lives produce a fragrant incense, wafting up into the heavens. Our whole selves are meant to be offered to the newborn king and thus to the world.

We too must bring our myrrh. Myrrh is a fragrant oil used in the preparation of dead bodies for their funerals. If we are to meet Christ, to love the King of Justice, we must die. Our first death is through baptism, dying to sin. But the Christian life is one of dying to our desire for power and prestige. The Greek word is *ascesis*. That's where we get the word *ascetical* and the phrase *the ascetical life*. A lifestyle which involves a daily dying to oneself in humility to God's holy will for us.

If we read the Magi's offerings in this way, we come to see that Epiphany is not just the feast but the very pattern of joyful, missionary discipleship each of us must embrace if we are to come and adore Christ the King all year long.

- What more can I do to bring light to darkness in my own spirit as well as the hearts and minds of those around me?
- Epiphany is a kind of "second Christmas." What "gifts" do I have to offer, and how can I best use them? Do I do everything I can to welcome people, just as the Magi from the East were welcomed at the cradle of the infant Jesus?

Let us bring the gold of our material wealth and physical possessions; the incense of those Spirit-moments and God-moments of our lives; the myrrh, the funeral oils of our suffering and pain, and lay them before the Lord. How far will YOU go? Come, let us adore him. AMEN!