

Here we are on the 10th day of Christmas, only slightly premature in our celebration of the visit of the magi to the Christ Child in Bethlehem. We have not quite concluded our twelve day celebration of the incarnation, but we are anxious for its showing forth to the entire world. We want the world to see and know that this miraculous birth, this wondrous evidence of God's love for his creatures, is meant for everyone, not merely for us, not merely for the people of Israel, not merely for people long ago, but for all people in all times and places.

Much is made of the word 'epiphany', what it meant, what it means. The verb *'επιφαινειν* means 'to show forth, to shine forth, to be suddenly revealed, or to be in plain sight'. This is our feast of lights, our experience of the divine will for humanity suddenly being revealed in the full sight of everyone. It was a significant departure for an event in the land of Israel, even a communication from God, to be seen and acknowledged beyond the boundaries of this particular group of descendents of Abraham. It had long been recognized that some day this would happen. Throughout Advent we hear readings from the prophets about how light would come to Israel and that light would draw people from everywhere to wonder and worship and rejoice.

In our Epistle, Paul speaks of this most eloquently: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

From the beginning, God has meant to be close to us, to be part of us, to invite us to be one with him. This is indeed a major revelation, something very important for everyone to know.

This is life-changing, world-changing. God has taken on flesh and come among us. And so the star shone forth and drew the scholars from afar.

These kings or magi or wisemen were the scientists and scholars of their age. They were those who devoted their lives to studying the universe and learning all they could about how it worked and what it meant. The learning of generations was set down in their books and that learning told them of the potential meaning of the star. And so they came to see, to see the shining forth, the manifestation. And they brought gifts, not standard baby gifts useful to the young family, but tributes, representing their understanding of the meaning of this revelation. Gold and Frankincense and Myrrh for the King and God and Sacrifice.

These kings or magi or wisemen, scholars or scientists, traditionally called Gaspar, Balthazar and Melchior, are our representatives. They are the wise of the wide world come to recognize this wonderful event and carry it back from Bethlehem to the rest of humanity, to us. They read their signs and they brought their gifts – What about us?

When and how do we see Jesus as King? As God? As Sacrifice? When and how do we acknowledge him as King? As God? As Sacrifice?

Consider briefly the words of that well-known carol, which was my very favorite as a child, and which we will sing at the end of today's service.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain
Gold I bring to crown Him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

This is a king for everyone, a king forever, clearly a different sort of king than any who sits on a throne and rules a country, making treaties and laws. This is a king to rule our hearts and our daily lives.

Frankincense to offer have I;
Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, voices raising,
Worshipping God on high.

The incense recognizes that God is right here with us, acknowledges the immanence of God, God's presence in the manger, in our houses and offices, in the minutiae of our daily lives.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone cold tomb.

The myrrh is the most jarring gift, recognizing that this vulnerable infant has come not only to share the struggles and challenges of our daily lives, but to suffer and die for us, for each and all of us.

And finally,

Glorious now behold Him arise;
King and God and sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Sounds through the earth and skies.

Thus the carol ends not with Christmas or Epiphany, but with Easter. The revelation is that Jesus was not only born and killed for us, but that he also rose for us. This is the full revelation, that the love of God comes into the world to draw us to himself, and that no matter what we do to reject that offer of love, God keeps coming back, that God will not be denied.

So again: When and how do we see Jesus as King? As God? As Sacrifice? When and how do we acknowledge him as King? As God? As Sacrifice?

We see Jesus as King whenever one of his parables or one of the events of his life calls us to obedience, reminds us of

how we are meant to live, regardless of other urges to the contrary. When I am going about the ordinary routine of my life and feel myself called to account for submitting to another authority. When I make my choices based on my own safety or on how much money I can make, and then see Jesus looking at me out of the faces of the poor or in the challenge to move into a new future. Then I see him as the King who commands my allegiance. When Paul was struck down on the road to Damascus, made blind for a while in order to see the truth of God in Christ, he asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' He knew this was his King, this was the one whom he should be serving, but he did not yet know who it was. So it can be for us in big dramatic ways like Paul's, or in the smaller moments of our daily choices, Jesus can speak to us with authority and reclaim our obedience, our allegiance to a life walked on his path.

Similarly, when I see my coworker suffering and being mistreated by other people and choose to follow the path of the Good Samaritan, to step aside from my personal job concerns, from my own busy-ness, to offer comfort and assistance, then I am accepting Jesus as my King. I push the bosses and pundits of this world off of his throne and acknowledge that I have no king but Jesus.

How about Jesus as God? Jesus is not merely a baby born in humble circumstances, not merely a healer and teacher and moral exemplar. Jesus is God Incarnate, the Creator and Source of all that is, come to dwell among us and be one with us. Some of us see the divinity of Jesus when we look at an icon, that wonderful Orthodox window on Heaven. Some of us see the divinity of Jesus when we read the Gospels, especially the wondrous poetry of John, or when we read the descriptions of the mystical experiences of the Saints as they have stunning personal encounters with the risen Lord and experience his divinity first hand. Some of us are fortunate to have such mystical experiences ourselves, experiences in which Jesus overwhelms our hearts and minds with his loving presence. Such people are most fortunate.

How then do we respond, acknowledge Jesus' divinity? What is our equivalent to the gift of frankincense, to Thomas falling on his knees exclaiming, 'My Lord and my God!?' Our life of prayer can be that acknowledgement. When we pray to Jesus and through Jesus and in the Name of Jesus. When we invoke the Trinity, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we are acknowledging the divinity of Jesus. Sometimes these things seem more formulaic than heartfelt, but sometimes we feel this reality at our very depths, that Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-Us, God-with-Me, in the fabric of ourselves and our lives, and then the acknowledgement can be a glorious outpouring of delight and gratitude.

Some reserve the recognition of Jesus as sacrifice for Good Friday. Once a year, the sacrifice of the Cross is experienced and the stunning fact of God Incarnate dying for us nearly knocks us flat. But Jesus may choose to come to us in this guise, the Lamb that was Slain, the one who took all our sins upon him once for all, at other times and in other contexts. When we look on the willful malevolence of human beings. When we see how persistently we ill-treat one another. When we see the growing suffering of the victims of hunger, fear, oppression, violence and degradation throughout our world. Then we often see the face of the Crucified One. When we are most aware of the evil committed by human beings against one another, then we see the suffering of God, the grief of God at our rejection of Him and His way of Love, the sacrifice made on our behalf. In the face of all the victims, and in the pain of our own suffering, we find the consolation of Jesus' Passion. We know the love that triumphed over all violence and rejection.

Jesus left us with the ultimate way to acknowledge his sacrifice in the Eucharist. He commanded us to remember it each time we gather for our communal meal – and in this meal we share in the sacrifice, just as in Baptism we go down to death with Him and rise to new life in Him. The myrrh does have a slightly bitter smell, but it is not something that turns us away.

Myrrh is still employed as perfume in Africa. It is a valued scent used to adorn the living and honor the dead. It is an offering which expresses gratitude for the life that has ended in token of the love which remains. So our memorial in the Eucharist is not a cult of death, but a triumphant acknowledgement of the life that comes out of that free acceptance of death on our behalf. Like Balthazar we are grateful and we are hopeful and we recognize the way of the Cross to be in fact the way of Life for everyone.

Each Epiphany may find us in a different place in our own journeys following the Star to place where Jesus breaks into our lives. Sometimes we may be bearers of Gold, experiencing the Kingship which gives meaning and direction to our lives. Other times we may be bearers of Frankincense, praising the God who has come into our hearts with such love. Still others we may be the bearers of Myrrh, looking ahead to the Passion, seeing in the infant the one whose death will bring the promise of life for everyone, the one whose suffering promises hope and compassion to all who suffer.

Whether today you are Gaspar, Melchior, or Balthazar, may the star guide you to its perfect light and may each of you carry that light far into the wide world for the benefit of all. Amen.