

SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY  
JANUARY 4/5, 2020

Today's feast is known by several names: "The Epiphany", "Little Christmas" or "The Feast of the Three Kings." While our reading from Isaiah and the story in St. Matthew's Gospel do not tell us explicitly how many "magi" came from the east to pay homage to the Christ Child, because both accounts mention three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh, tradition and popular devotion have both assumed that they numbered three. Equally, various theories have been advanced as to careers of these "kings"—astronomers, temple priests of the Zoroastrian cult that worshiped fire, teachers of philosophy. All can serve as points of reference for reflection. In popular devotion statues of the "kings" in public and private crèche scenes always show one of them to be dark-skinned. One take on the identity of the kings (and even some portrayals) depicts one as a Caucasian representing Europe, one African and one Asian. I'd like to use this last interpretation as a springboard for our reflection today.

In today's refrain of the Responsorial Psalm we proclaimed: *Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.* (Ps.72) St. Paul in today's reminds us "*the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" (Eph. 3:5,6). Isaiah in the first reading proclaims: "*Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you.*" (Isa.60:1-6). Epiphany proclaims Jesus, born of Mary, the Christ, the savior of the world, who brings the gift of God's salvation to all nations. The Church, the body of Christ, all of us collectively and individually, incorporated into his body through baptism is called to reflect and proclaim God's universal message of salvation.

Over the past three months Pope Francis has presided at three special Masses which visibly reflect the message of the Epiphany as well as calling us as the Church to embrace its missionary call to be, in fact, the Body of Christ, the community in which all are welcomed and embraced.

On the First Sunday of Advent the sounds of African drums and loud shouts filled St. Peter's Basilica as the pope celebrated Mass with Rome's Congolese migrant community. On

the Third Sunday of Advent the joyous sounds of Filipino music filled the Basilica at a Mass with Rome's Pilipino migrants in the traditional "Singbang Gabi" celebration. In October the sounds, dance and art of the church in the Amazon added to the Mass at the opening of the special synod for the Church in the Amazon. All of this did not go unnoticed by long-time Vatican clerics and bureaucrats. Some complained that all of this took away from the solemnity due to the Eucharist. Others were bumped from their usual reserved places to make way for these interlopers. Which brings us back to the Three Kings and Epiphany.

St. Matthew tells us that Herod, the chief priests, and all Jerusalem were "*greatly troubled*" (Mt. 2:3) both by the presence of the visitors and their inquiry regarding "*the newborn king of the Jews.*" (Mt. 2:2). Herod, suspecting a political and/or military coup, reacts with fear to protect his claims and eventually orders the massacre of the children of Bethlehem. The chief priests, experts in the religious teachings and laws, fearing loss of their prestige and place in society, give a lukewarm response to Herod and the visitors. And here is where the Three Kings serve as a point of reflection and challenge for us today.

Like them, their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh can also be interpreted symbolically. In his embrace of the migrants of Rome and the participants of the Amazon Synod, Pope Francis is calling us as the church to see, recognize, and accept the gifts of the persons and cultures of the world. Unlike Herod and the chief priests who reacted with fear and indifference, the Holy Father is inviting us to open our arms in welcome to the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant, who offer us their gifts and talents, who enrich our understanding of life and God, and the richness of their cultures. The Pope reminds us: "*Every stranger who knocks at the door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ...an invitation to overcome our fears so as to encounter the other, to welcome, to know and to acknowledge him or her...to [open ourselves] without prejudice to their rich diversity, to understand the hopes and potential of the newly arrived as well as their fears and vulnerabilities.*" (January 14, 2018)

We are richer, not poorer, for the visit of today's Three Kings as we journey with them, from every land and people and prostrate ourselves in homage to Christ.

5 January, 2020 Father Jim Devoa