

LECTIO DIVINA (Holy Reading)
PRAYING WITH THE SACRED SCRIPTURES.
Sunday 2 January 2022
The Epiphany of the Lord, Year C.

Sometimes called “Little Christmas”, this feast is a celebration of the revelation of Christ to the whole world – people other than Jews, who would go down in history as Gentiles.

The first Gentiles were the three Magi from the East. Where is the East? It is thought to be Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, India. They came with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the New Testament they are called sages. The idea that they were kings became general from the 6th century. The New Testament says nothing about their number, but one of the early Fathers of the Church gave it as three, most probably on account of the three gifts. Their names: Kasper, Melchior and Balthasar, are first mentioned in the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*, a late 5th century or early 6th century document. This document is described as a poor Latin translation of a lost Alexandrian Greek original.

The names of the Magi are also found in a later quotation of St. Bede the Venerable in *Collectanea et Flores*. This book was attributed to St. Bede the Venerable. It was written in 735 and the description of the Magi is as follows: Melchior was an old man with white hair and a long beard. His gift to the Lord Jesus was gold. Gasper was a young man without a beard, and with a countenance that spoke of hard work outside in fields or other places (“a ruddy” appearance). Balthasar was of black complexion, with a heavy beard. The myrrh he carried prefigured the death of Jesus.

In the Middle Ages the three sages were venerated as saints and the Milanese claimed to possess their relics, brought from Constantinople in the 5th century. They were taken to Germany by Frederick Barbarossa in 1162 and are now enshrined in Cologne Cathedral. (I have summarized this information from the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 1961).

The Gospel reading for the Epiphany is Matthew 2:1-12. I have decided just to pray with the Gospel this week, with its very rich historical background and spiritual depths.

***Lectio:* Read the Gospel text from Matthew 2:1-12**

“We have seen his star in the East and have come to adore the Lord.” “We have come from the East to worship the king.” St. John Cassian taught that we need to till the soil of our hearts every day with the plough of the Gospel. So, let us do that now, firstly with reverence for the sacred book we call the Bible and secondly by opening our hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit calling us forth to make our response. We may feel a few rocks and stones being removed by the plough! This is necessary in order to prepare the soil of our hearts for new Gospel seeds and thus new growth. Be aware of the Holy Spirit playing on the fibres of your heart as you read. This is the true “oratio” (prayer) of *Lectio Divina*.

***Meditatio:* Some further background to enrich our reading, reflection and response.**

First of all, we have the three sages. I have already given details above about these sages. Secondly there is Herod (Idumean Herod the Great). He was “the first major client-king in Israel after its subjugation to Rome. He reigned from 37-4 B.C., levying heavy taxes on the Jews and conscripting labour. He was paranoid about would-be usurpers to his throne, and he had many family members and close friends executed. Today, such a mental illness would be helped by the

right medication, but not in the time of Herod. Plunder, murder, paranoia, and revenge – If you thought someone was in your way politically, or about to usurp your power, you had them killed. The story of Herod’s disturbance at the report of the birth of the Christ-Child, and his subsequent massacre of the Innocents fits this pattern of behaviour.” (Who’s Who in the Bible, edited by Paul Gardner) The feast day for the children killed by Herod is 28 December.

The Star: Fr. Karl Rahner has written some challenging and beautiful words for every Christian. He says we are all following the star to Bethlehem, in our everyday life: “Throw down your defences. The star is shining! Whether or not you make it the lodestar of your journey, it stands in your sky, and even your defiance and your weakness do not extinguish it...a new year has begun. During this year all the paths from east to west, from morning to evening, lead on and on as far as the eye can see, through the deserts of life with all its changes. These paths can be turned into the blessed pilgrimage to the absolute, the journey to God. Set out, my heart, take up the journey. The star shines.” (Page 106, “The Great Church Year”).

Read the text again and ponder. Ponder well and often on this Gospel, throughout the week ahead. Where are you called to respond? To the star? The manger? The adoration of the Magi?

This year, the Liturgical Commission is recommending that we carry out the ancient custom of the Epiphany Blessing – “marking the door of the home with blessed chalk [as] a way of incorporating the liturgical feast of the “Epiphany as a domestic ritual into the prayer life of the family. The chalk is first blessed in the Parish church. Then you are invited to take some home and to mark the lintel of the front door as follows:

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Casper, Melchior and Balthasar. The words also represent Christus *Mansionem Benedicat* (*May Christ Bless this Abode*). Ordo, 2022, p.26.

The Epiphany is the blessed journey of the God-seeking person. (Fr. Karl Rahner)

If you like poetry, you may like to read T.S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi” and become involved in its symbolism to assist you in entering into today’s feast.

The Journey of the Magi

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:

A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

~ T.S. Eliot

