

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Solemnity of the Epiphany, Jan. 5-6, 2019, Cycle C

The term "Epiphany" is a Greek word meaning showing forth or "manifestation." In our Christmas celebration "Epiphany" refers to the Christmas Story we find in the Gospel of Matthew. On Christmas Day itself at the Night Mass we read the Gospel of Luke's version of the Christmas Story. Luke's Christmas Story has Angels notifying poor shepherds in the nearby fields about the birth of the Messiah. The message of Luke is quite clear, Jesus the Messiah has come for the outcasts, the poor, the downtrodden, those who don't count for much in society – but Luke's Christmas Story does not go beyond the confines of the Jewish nation. The Shepherds are Jews.

On Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, we read Matthew's version of the Christmas Story. Matthew's Christmas Story presents us with the delightful tale of the infant Jesus being manifested by a star which guides exotic visitors from the east to Bethlehem. Matthew's Gospel tells us that these visitors from the east were Magi – either court magicians or astrologers of some kind – since they were interested in the movement of stars. On the basis of the three gifts presented to Jesus – gold, frankincense and myrrh – a tradition arose that there were three magi, but Matthew's gospel never does tell us how many magi there were.

The gifts of the magi manifest or show forth a great deal about this child Messiah. Traditionally, gold signifies kingship, Jesus succeeds to the throne of David. Frankincense signifies the Divine, the priesthood of Jesus. As Messiah, Jesus is the eternal high priest who will offer once and for all the sacrifice that will take away the sins of the world. Myrrh was an ointment used for anointing the dead for burial. Jesus is human, though divine, He must obey the laws of nature and will die, and a very violent death at that.

What has come to be called the Epiphany Story of Matthew has fascinated people of all ages for many centuries – poems and short stories have been written about the visit of the magi – even an opera has been composed about the Epiphany story called "Amahl and the Night Visitors" – many of you have probably seen "Amahl and the Night Visitors" on either television, or the stage.

The Gospel of Matthew tells a different Christmas story than Luke because Matthew wants to teach us a different theological lesson than Luke. The lesson has to do with who the Magi are, and from where they come. The Magi, remember, are from the east, outside the borders of Israel – the Jewish nation. The magi manifest or show forth that the Gentile world also desires a Messiah, though the Gentiles are guided by the light of Israel to the Messiah – the light of a nation that worships the one, true God. For as Isaiah the prophet says about Gentiles in the First Reading: "thick clouds cover the peoples," but about Israel: "but upon you the Lord shines, and over you his glory. Nations shall walk by your light." In other words, God intends Israel to be the light that shows the way to God and salvation.

Israel is to act as a light to the nations. Through Israel God will offer salvation to "all the ends of the earth," who the magi symbolize. As St. Paul puts it in our second scripture for this day: "the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." In Jesus, the light of salvation has come to all nations through Israel.

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What great joy for us that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is Messiah for all peoples. The Magi represent all the different peoples and races of the world. Because of the theological message of Matthew's Christmas Story; in many nations – Epiphany – the climax of Christmas – has come to be celebrated with greater festivity than Christmas Day itself. Epiphany is the day of gift giving and feasting, particularly in Italy and Spain.

Finally, when Matthew finishes his gospel – he has the Risen Christ sending forth his disciples to proclaim the good news to “all the nations” baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. No wonder the Epiphany Story has captured the hearts and imaginations of so many peoples as they celebrate the Christmas season – Epiphany should capture our hearts too. So feast, rejoice, and make Merry as we celebrate; Jesus has come for all.