

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Solemnity of the Epiphany, Jan. 2-3, 2021, Cycle B

We usually picture the Epiphany story with three wise men. This is probably due to there being three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tradition has given those wise men the names of Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar.

Well, a man by the name of Henry Van Dyke wrote a story about a fourth wise man. His name was Artaban. Artaban planned to travel along with his fellow kings. However, he delayed to assist a woman who was dying. So, he missed the march west. As gifts he carried a precious sapphire, a rare ruby, and an exquisite pearl. He had to give up his sapphire, to help a starving family. When he finally found the house, it was deserted. Mary and Joseph had scooped up the child and escaped to Egypt. Artaban gave the ruby to secure the life of a babe destined to be destroyed by the mad King Herod. His search for the King of Kings continued for thirty-three years. When he learned of the events of Calvary, he rushed there to ransom Jesus with the priceless pearl. But on the way he met a man about to be sold into slavery. To the slave's master he gave the pearl as ransom. At that moment, the earthquake struck. Artaban was critically injured by falling debris. The man he just rescued held his head in his lap. The man whispered into Artaban's ear, "Because you did it for one of these, you did it for me". Artaban had found his King. The same spirit that prompted Artaban to help the dying woman, the starving family, the infant, and the slave should motivate us to move out of our underground bunkers and to do something similar, to bring the Light of Jesus to others.

As Easter is incomplete without Pentecost, so Christmas is incomplete without Epiphany. As Pentecost celebrates the fullness of Easter and focuses on the Church's mission to proclaim the good news of the Resurrection, so Epiphany celebrates the fullness of Christmas and focuses on our role as Church to proclaim Jesus (born in Bethlehem) as the Light of Nations. Without Epiphany, the celebration of Christmas Day would only be in exercise in nostalgia – remembering a birth that took place 2000 years ago, but having no real meaning for our lives today.

The wonderful story of the Magi, which we read every Epiphany, reminds us that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is the star sent to light up our dark world, and to be our guide to the eternal life of God's Kingdom. Jesus lights the way; and the Magi who are from gentile lands, show us that Jesus is sent to be the light of all people – God calls all nations, all peoples to share in the Light that is His Son, Jesus.

Epiphany, reminds us that Christmas proclaims; "Christus natus est, hodie!" That is, Christ is born into our lives today – hodie! Christ is alive in our lives now, which means that Epiphany demands that we look forward to the future, not back to the past in nostalgia.

As the Magi responded to the Star – who was really Christ – and did something! They got up and followed that star! So Epiphany calls on us to make a response, too, to the Light of Bethlehem. We must follow the Star, Jesus so Jesus fills us with His Light that we may let His Light shine out toward others.

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Epiphany proclaims that Jesus calls on us to be His Church, and our mission as Church is to be the embodiment of Christ to the world. When Isaiah spoke to Jerusalem some 2500 years ago, he is also speaking to the modern ears of the Church today:

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem!

Your light has come,
The glory of the Lord shines
Upon you.

See, darkness cover the earth,
And thick clouds cover the peoples;
But upon you the Lord shines,
And over you appears in glory.

Nations shall walk by your light,
And kings by you shining radiance.

Raise your eyes and look about,
They all gather and come to you:
Your sons and your daughters in the arms
Of their nurses.

Epiphany challenges us to walk beyond Christ's historical birth in Bethlehem. Epiphany calls on us to manifest, reveal, and radiate God's glory now. Imitating the Magi, we follow the star, who is Jesus, but more profoundly we have to realize that the whole Christmas – Epiphany mystery is calling us to “be the star” as Artaban was that Star of Light to others that leads others to the Messiah and King – who is the Light who guides us on pilgrimage “back home” through this world's darkness.