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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
January 3, 2021 Streaming Mass
Epiphany 2021 Mt 2:2-12

Today's gospel functions as a kind of overture to St. Matthew's gospel, and just as the overture of a symphony or an opera, it serves to introduce what follows. An overture may be a potpourri of different tunes from the opera or symphony, or it may just subtly indicate with suggestion and delicate nuance some of the great comic or tragic scenes of the particular work. In any case the overture prepares the audience for the drama that is about to unfold. So, the person who quite literally "knows the score" can recognize in the opening strains of the overture parallels and allusions to what will be filled out in a more lavish style. The overture can often be the "opera or symphony in a nutshell."

If we think of the gospels as just biographies of Jesus, as just some listing of the basic facts and statistics of His public life, then we run the risk of missing its artistry, its subtlety, and all the nuances that come from the evangelist's pen, then we never hear the music of God's word. So, if people complain that the Scriptures are full of contradictions, they are criticizing it for the wrong reason: they are presuming it is attempting to be or do something for which it makes no claim at all. If discrepancies appear in the gospels as they do, it is not so much a contradiction in the evidence presented. Rather, it is a harmonizing of different voices or a blending of different perspectives, each of which could never tell the whole story on its own, but together serve to portray the significance of the events described. So, the events narrated about the birth of Jesus are not to be taken as some first century news account. Rather, they possess more of an artistic style, an almost operatic quality.

The theme of St. Matthew's gospel, of which we have just heard the overture, is that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah. Here at last is God present to His people; Jesus is God's window upon the world. In Jesus, in His words, gestures and deeds, we catch a glimpse of the God we cannot see. The immensity of God's love is portrayed in this one particular life. Jesus is the epiphany of God, the total and complete manifestation of God's love in the world. The challenge for those who will meet this Jesus, when grown to adulthood, will be not just to believe that He is God, but more importantly to believe that God is like Jesus—that is, that the true nature of God does not conform to their previous notions of a Deity who is remote, judgmental, severe and harsh, but that the reality of God is disclosed in the compassion, acceptance and mercy that Jesus exhibits.

Matthew's gospel is the elaboration of Who precisely this Jesus is and what He is about. That announcement will present people with a choice: either to accept or to reject Him. In the events of Holy Week, the lines are very clearly drawn. But, already at the outset, in this overture, in the fanciful tale of the Magi, in the reactions of Herod, the chief priests and the scribes to the news of the Messiah's birth, there are hints of the drama to be played out on Good Friday. As we read in the beginning of St. John's Gospel, "He came into His own and His own received him not." They have no need of what He has to offer; or worse, He threatens to upset their vested interests in the little world they have constructed for themselves.

Even here at His birth as Jesus is proclaimed as Messiah, some are portrayed as rejecting Him, while others come to accept Him. Oddly enough, it is these outsiders, these pagan astrologers, who are the first to bestir themselves to seek out the newborn Savior. The astrologers recognize Him for Who He is, while the insiders, the scribes and the chief priests, those supposedly learned in the meaning of the Scriptures, are actually living a faith so empty that they make no effort to search for the Christ-Child. And Herod, their king, feels only rage at this threat to his security. The reaction of the religious and political forces at the birth of Jesus is a preview of the reception His ministry will eventually receive. The story of these outsiders, these Magi, speaks of the insufficiency of those insiders who think they have all the answers. It speaks of the insufficiency of knowledge alone to be a fertile ground for the seeds of faith. Religious knowledge has to be accompanied by an openness to God who can still speak in new and wonderful ways.

It would be a mistake for us to think that we today are somehow immune from the errors of those who lived in time of Jesus, as if we could not fall victim to the same temptation, that we would not presume to have all the answers, religiously speaking. For the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty—the presumption that we have everything figured out and therefore don't have to take the trouble to go any further in trying to develop our faith. St. Matthew presents the Magi as models of faith, as those who keep on searching even in the midst of darkness. The Magi, with only the elusive light of the star to lead them, are like contemporary God-seekers who continue to stumble along in their religious journey even when religious professionals sadly offer them little real guidance and direction. A mere recitation of the platitudes of religion, especially when not accompanied by a recognition of the doubt, the uncertainty, the pain of human life, will not lead to genuine faith. Faith is not something to be lived on automatic- pilot, presuming we know full well our destination and the terrain we are crossing. Rather faith is a mystery that ever eludes us, that demands to be probed and explored—a faith that needs to be questioned, so that we can be on the journey that leads to God. The Magi are restless models of faith; they are the ones who continue to

search, while the self-satisfied scribes and chief priests all stay at home and wait. The Magi, these outsiders, these searchers, discover God, while the insiders have only their rituals and theologies to console them.

Today's gospel warns us against an attitude of looking at our faith as some neat little package, as something we can keep under wraps. If faith is something we think we can possess, it may boomerang and come to appear as just a figment of our own imagination. Rather, faith is something that possesses us. The Gospel writers would have us see faith as a gift, as something that is not of our own construction, something over which we have no control, as something apart from ourselves, something that comes to us as from beyond ourselves, a revelation, as God's light breaking it in on the shadows of our world--an epiphany, a glimpse of God. Let us pray that we can remain steadfast on the journey, ready to catch the glimmers of God's light from whatever source they may appear, and willing to follow wherever they lead. For the promise is that this journey will renew us to the depths of our very being.