

Epiphany – 2021 – Year B

The stories of Jesus' birth are like overtures to an opera. They present the themes that will play out in the story to come and already indicate where it is all headed. In St. Luke's telling of the story of Jesus' birth the focus is on the humility of God—that he would be content to be born into the world in most humble circumstances says a lot about how willing he is to come to us and meet us where we are.

The details in Matthew's story provide a foreshadowing of one of the major themes of in his Gospel: the fact that Jesus was rejected by the religious elite but accepted not only among many of his fellow Jews, but most surprisingly, by the nations!

The story of the wise men determining from the heavens that something quite noteworthy was happening in Israel is the first installment of the story about how God reveals to the nations the saving power that is coming from the house of David, as promised from long before.

It's interesting how the revelation that comes from watching the heavens interacts with the revelation that comes from the tradition of Israel. In the theology of the Middle Ages this was called the “two books” of revelation: the book of scripture and the book of nature. The interaction between those two sources of revelation gives us some guidance about how we are to join together in our day what we have come to know from our religious tradition and knowledge that comes from other sources.

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From their study of the heavens the wise men knew in a general way which way to head. They were from the East, perhaps Persia or India, which both had strong traditions of watching the night sky, and they knew that Israel was in the West. But when they arrived there, they didn't hesitate to inquire at the royal court for more precise directions. The court officials were able to consult the prophetic tradition and provide further details: the birthplace would have to be in Bethlehem.

Unfortunately, at that moment the decision to reject the Good News also arrived. Herod may have been the one sitting on the throne, but he and his whole court knew that he was not of the house of David. He was there at the pleasure of the Romans and no ancient prophecy was ever referring to him. His claim would easily be trumped by a newborn king in the line of David. He had reason to be frightened by the developments.

But Herod was devious enough to spring into action. He talks the wise men into promising to inform him of what they find. Then, he will take care of the threat to his claim to the throne.

The wise men complete their journey and pay homage to the true king of Israel, and God makes sure that Herod's plan comes to naught.

We often lose sight of the fact that the teaching of the Church is so positively disposed to reason and the sciences. Perhaps that's a result of an overemphasis on Tradition, as

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if that was handed down whole and entire at some point, never to be developed from there on out.

In fact, the Tradition is a reflection on the events of our salvation from the light of faith and in communication with the development of human knowledge coming from the pursuit of truth by the light of reason. The two must move forward together. Without reason, and the best thinking the secular society has to offer, the Church has sometimes found itself on the wrong side of history and in need of correction. And sometimes that takes centuries. It wasn't until 1992 that Pope John Paul II apologized on behalf of the Church for the condemnation of Galileo, who had done nothing more than prove that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa.

On the other hand, reason divorced from faith, can get caught up in the attitude that if something can be done, then it should be done, ignoring the moral implications. Human cloning would be an example.

The story of the wise men seeking out the newborn king of the Jews and offering him homage puts things in their proper perspective. By the light of their knowledge of the heavens the wise men seek out the true star, the light of the world. We use the best gifts that reason provides and place them also at the feet of Jesus, the one who brings salvation to the nations, trusting that his Spirit will guide us into a future that aligns with heaven, just as the stars did with Bethlehem 2000 years ago.