

January 5, 2020 Star Power Homily: In July of 1969, the American spacecraft, Apollo 11, landed on the surface of the moon. It was a monumental achievement and a milestone in the history of space travel. The three members of the crew, astronauts Neil Armstrong, Ed “Buzz” Aldrin and Michael Collins, became instant celebrities. The then President of the United States, Richard Nixon, raved about the moon landing and declared that memorable week in 1969 the greatest in the world since creation.

The three astronauts made a good will tour around the world, visiting twenty seven countries in forty-five days. One of the space travelers wrote a book, “Return to Earth”, in which he shared his reflections on his epoch making mission. He said that one of the most striking and stirring moments was a visit to the Vatican. The three astronauts and their wives were granted a special audience with the pope in the papal library. They were especially moved by the unusual gifts presented them by Paul VI. “His Holiness”, he wrote, “unveiled three magnificent porcelain statues of the three wise men. The pope suggested that the three wise men were directed by looking at the stars and that the three astronauts also reached their destination by looking at the stars”.

In the feast of the Epiphany, a heavenly, supernatural light shines on the Magi, the so-called “wise men”. Who were these mysterious figures from the East? According to biblical scholars, they were likely men of science who were highly learned and cultured. It would not be far-fetched to call them early astronomers. Clearly, they were not Jews but noble pagans who were on a particular quest. They were guided by a star... a point of light in the sky... to Bethlehem, where they found the newborn King of the Jews.

Since the star figures prominently in today’s gospel, we may wish to understand and appreciate its symbolism.

First, the star may symbolize God’s divine word. In the Old Testament Book of Psalms, we read the words of the inspired Psalmist: “Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path”. The Jewish scholars of Jerusalem, the priests and the scribes, could point to a prophecy in the Book of the prophet Micah, indicating the King-Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people, Israel.” The chief priests and the scribes of the people (Mt. 2:4) served as guides to the Magi, but they themselves chose not to undertake the long journey with them to the city of David’s birth.

Second, the star may be a symbol of Christ Himself. In John’s gospel, Jesus identifies himself as the Light of the World. His light illuminates a world in darkness. And it is to his light that all seekers are destined to come. In the words of the erstwhile Pontiff, Benedict XVI, “The story of the wise men’s star makes a point: it is not the star that determines the child’s destiny’ it is the child that directs the star”.

Third, the star may point to each one of us. We are called to be stars inasmuch as we are called to be like the star which guided the Magi on their journey. The saints are the true “stars” of God because they lead others along the path toward the true light, towards Christ. So many of our friends and family members are like the Magi searching for someone who will give them meaning and purpose in their lives, but they have no “star” to follow. All too many are lost, wandering aimlessly about on a road leading to a dead end. By reflecting the light of Christ in our own lives we can guide these people who are especially dear to us in the “Way, the Truth and the Life”. (Jn. 14:6) Recall the words of a popular children’s hymn: “This little light of mine, I’m gonna make it shine”.

Epiphany is the feast which reminds us of the need to bring all nations to Christ. The long journey of the intrepid scientists from the East is simply the great beginning of the great procession that continues throughout history. With the Magi, humanity’s pilgrimage to the One who is “Light from Light”, Jesus Christ, begins.

Today, we can rejoice because the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled: “Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you”. (Is. 60:1) Christ shines his light on us.

Amen!