Dear Friends,

The Journey of the Magi – our own quest for wholeness

The feast of the Epiphany holds a magic spell on everyone who reads the story. The story evokes a plethora of questions to the reader. Who were the Magi? Which is the country of their origin? How many were they? How long did they travel? Why these special gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for a newborn child? What happened to them after they reached back to their country? Is it possible that the bones of the Magi — Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar — are kept in a golden tomb in the largest Gothic cathedral in Europe? An ancient tradition recounts the tale of how the bodies of the Magi who visited the Christ child found their way to their final resting place in Germany’s Cologne Cathedral. We may not get convincing answers to any of the questions. But the story gives an insight into humanity’s search for meaning and purpose for life.

The ancient Magi of the Gospel reading traveled from darkness into light. They sought the Prince of Peace. The sudden appearance of a bright star was the symbol of the birth of a great one, they concluded. They traveled west, following the star’s course, until they came to Judea. Then they went to the place where they expected a great one to be found. They went to the palace. Instead of a great one, they found a wicked king, Herod. Now, Herod was only concerned with one thing in his life, and that was Herod. He had the opportunity to come out of darkness into the light. His own scripture scholars found that the coming Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But Herod feared the political effects of a Messiah coming during his reign. His darkness was so deep that he would attempt to kill the baby, challenging God’s plan rather than trusting God to care for him if he also were to come into the light. Meanwhile, the Magi’s faith had become so deep that after they found the child and worshiped him, they put their lives in jeopardy. Once they possessed the child in their hearts, the Magi could live in His light and die in His peace. Because Herod refused to enter the child’s light, he would die in turmoil and in darkness.

The Evangelist Matthew tells us that the Magi, when they came to Bethlehem, “saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him” (Mt 2:11). Worshiping the Lord is not easy; it does not just happen. It requires a certain spiritual maturity and is the fruit of an at times lengthy interior journey. Worshiping God is not something we do spontaneously. True, human beings have a need to worship, but we can risk missing the goal. Indeed, if we do not worship God, we will worship idols — there is no middle way, it is either God or idols; or, to use the words of a French writer: “Whoever does not worship God, worships the devil” (Léon Bloy) — and instead of becoming believers, we will become idolaters.

“In our day, it is particularly necessary for us, both as individuals and as commu-
FIRST READING
Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. (Is 60:1)

PSALM
Lord, every nation on earth will adore you. (Ps 72)

SECOND READING
It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph 3:5-6)

GOSPEL
“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” (Mt 2:2)


GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture
In his Apostolic Exhortation, The joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis references a thought from Pope Benedict XVI: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Today we celebrate an encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ! This simple but holy event in time dramatically changes human life, pointing it toward a new horizon and giving it a decisive direction. This is a message and truth that is not meant to be shared with only a select few who qualify but with the entire world. Pope Francis continues saying, “Thanks solely to this encounter or renewed encounter with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.”

Look around at people. Where is life heading for them? What gives them direction? Even we who are people of faith can get distracted and lose our focus. God, in all of His fullness, is revealed in Jesus Christ and we can encounter Him! God is tangible, real, vulnerable, poor, and full of wonders, surprises, and opportunities. For those who are struggling and lost, today is a day of great joy. All they have to do is reach out and touch the truth of Christ. This presence is revealed in the poor, exploited, and vulnerable ones who cry out for compassion and love. But it is also found in the faithful ones who see in the Epiphany of God a liberation from structures and systems that hurt us, a narrowing of mind and heart that constricts us, and an absorption in our self-agenda that prevents us from seeing anything other than ourselves as important.

We have been given the charge of preaching this Good News. If only we could find a way to be more effective, it might stand a chance of doing what God intended it to do. There is always tomorrow and our memory of that bright new light that shone so brilliantly that Bethlehem night pointing us to truth and reminding us that we are loved.
The first reading: Is 60:1 - 6

Today’s Old Testament reading, Isaiah 60:1-6, is chosen partly because it mentions non-Jews bringing gifts in homage to the God of Israel. Here the Prophet Isaiah, consoling the people in exile, speaks of the restoration of New Jerusalem from which the glory of Yahweh becomes visible even to the pagan nations.

“Jerusalem,” the prophet Isaiah cries out, “your light has come in the midst of darkness and thick clouds covering the earth; the glory of the Lord shines upon you.” For the people of Israel, then in exile in a foreign land, Isaiah was promising redemption, renewal, and restoration — a new life, to be lived in their own land. And the promise goes beyond the Jewish people to include all peoples. For the prophecy continues, “Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Thus, in this passage, the prophecy which the Lord God gives His people celebrates the Divine Light that will emanate from Jerusalem, and it pictures all the nations acknowledging and enjoying that Light and walking by It. As a sign of gratitude for the priceless lessons of Faith offered by Jerusalem, the nations will bring wealth by land and sea, especially gold for the Temple and frankincense for the sacrifice. Everyone will be drawn to Jerusalem because the radiance of God’s favor rests on her. This prophecy of Isaiah is realized in Jesus Christ, God’s Anointed One (Christ; Messiah), Savior of the world, and in His Church, the New Jerusalem made up of Jews and Gentiles. This reading with its response expresses Hope for a time when “the people of God” will embrace all nations.

This proclamation of Israel’s universal mission is bathed in light, radiance, and splendor, with a poetry strikingly similar to that of Second Isaiah.

The second reading: Eph 3:2 - 3, 5 - 6

Paul is presented as speaking to the part he played in the plan (Gr: oikonomia) of God’s grace (v2). "Mystery" (Gr: mysterion) (v3) is an important word in Paul; the reference is to the ultimate salvific plan of God, concealed from ages past and revealed only in the fullness of time (1:9; 2:13 - 17; 1 Cor 2:1). This previously hidden plan is now made known to the holy apostles and prophets. As foundational to the church, their importance as recipients of revelation is of paramount importance (v5; 2:20). The revealed secret is the total equality of Gentiles with the Jews in the saving plan of God (v6). The Greek text emphasizes this equality with the prefix syn (with) attached to heirs, body members, and partners. Once made members of the body in the Holy Spirit, the elect becomes heirs of the reign (Gal 4:7). The use of the three compound nouns underscores the note of non-distinction and the elimination of all separating barriers.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

The magi story is an important Matthean statement of belief in Christ and his mission, a post-Easter trajectory expressive of that fuller understanding which the church had only after the Spirit was given. Here a number of biblical texts converge to point up the author’s intent. Jesus, the Descendant of David: This comes to the fore in the principal text of the narrative (v6). This combines a text of Micah (5:1, 3) with one from 2 Samuel (5:2). The "clans" of the original Micah become "rulers" in Matthew to highlight the royal associations. Davidic origins are connected with Bethlehem, the home of David’s father Jesse (1 Sam 16). The conflated text points also to Christ as a shepherd king. The appearance of the star offers additional Davidic overtones, as related to the Balaam prophecy (Num 24:17) of a royal figure rising out of the line of Jacob. The appearance of a new star in antiquity was popularly identified with the birth of a future leader.

Jewish and Gentile Reaction: Herod ruled from 37 to 4 B.C. The story is well suited to what is known of his character, but beyond that many details of the story need not be pressed. What appears clearly is the enigmatic situation in which the early church found itself. The Jews for whom the Messiah was the promised one refuse to accept him, while the Gentiles come to him in ever greater numbers. Thus, in the story, the Jewish experts, guardians of the tradition, easily identify the child's prophesied birthplace (v5f). But their response is one of widespread fear (“all Jerusalem with Herod,” v3) and duplicity (v8). "Magi" was a term originally applied to Persian priests, and eventually to diviners, here astrologers. They make their way through Judaism (Jerusalem) to the truth of Christ.

The author draws on a number of texts to underscore universalism. Foreigners bring gifts (Ps 72:10), including gold and frankincense (Is 60:6), in reflecting Gentile openness to the gospel. (The mention of "kings" in the psalm text and the three gifts mentioned in the story gave rise to the tradition that the visitors were three kings.) The foreigners’ recognition of Christ’s position is seen in their act of adoration (Gr: proskuneo), the same veneration offered to Jesus by the apostles after the resurrection (28:17).

Jesus, the New Moses: The Matthean infancy narrative in general has Jesus relive the experience of Moses/Israel. This appears in the magi story as well. There is a strong resemblance to the legend found in the historian Josephus about the prediction of Moses’ birth given by his sages to Pharaoh and his reaction in the slaughter of innocent children.

The type of literature reflected in this story, often designated "haggadic midrash," draws on biblical and non-biblical texts and narratives to make a strong moral or didactic point. Here it casts light on the meaning of Christ in the light of Hebrew tradition.
The Epiphany can be looked on as a symbol for our pilgrimage through life to Christ. The feast invites us to see ourselves in the Magi—a people on a journey to Christ. Today’s Gospel also tells us the story of the encounter of the Magi with the evil King Herod. This encounter demonstrates three reactions to Jesus’ birth, a) Hatred: a group of people headed by Herod planned to destroy Jesus; b) Indifference: another group, composed of priests and scribes, ignored Jesus; c) Adoration: the members of a third group—shepherds and the magi—adored Jesus and offered themselves to Him.

**The destructive group:** King Herod considered Jesus a potential threat to his kingship. Herod the Great was a cruel, selfish king who murdered his mother-in-law, wife, two brothers-in-law and three children on suspicion that they had plotted against him. In today’s Gospel, Herod asks the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah is to be born. Their answer tells him, and us, much more, combining two strands of Old Testament promise—one revealing the Messiah to be from the line of David (see 2 Samuel 2:5), the other predicting “a ruler of Israel” who will “shepherd his flock” and whose “greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth” (see Micah 5:1-3) (Dr. Hann). Later, the scribes and Pharisees would plot to kill Jesus because Jesus had criticized them and tried to reform some of their practices. Today, many oppose Christ and the Church because of their selfish motives, evil ways, and unjust lives.

**The group that ignored Christ:** The scribes, the Pharisees, and the Jewish priests knew that there were nearly 500 prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the promised Messiah. They were able to tell Herod the exact time and place of Jesus’ birth. They were in the habit of concluding their reading from the prophets on the Sabbath day by saying, “We shall now pray for the speedy arrival of the Messiah.” Unfortunately, they were more interested in their own selfish gains than in discovering the truth. Hence, they refused to go and see the child Jesus—even though Bethlehem was quite close to Jerusalem. Today, many Christians remind us of this group. They practice their religion from selfish motives, like gaining political power, prestige, and recognition by society. They ignore Jesus’ teachings in their private lives.

**The group that adored Jesus and offered Him gifts:** This group was composed of the shepherds and the Magi. The shepherds offered the only gifts they had: love, tears of joy, and probably woolen clothes and milk from their sheep. The Magi, probably Persian astrologers, were following the star that Balaam had predicted would rise, along with the ruler’s staff, over the house of Jacob (see Numbers 24:17). The Magi offered gold, in recognition of Jesus as the King of the Jews; frankincense, in acknowledgment that He was God, and myrrh as a symbol of His human nature. “Like the Magi, every person has two great ‘books’ which provide the signs to guide this pilgrimage: the book of creation and the book of sacred Scripture. What is important is that we be attentive, alert, and listen to God Who speaks to us, Who always speaks to us.” (Pope Francis)

**QUIZ TIME**

1. In the second reading Paul tells the people that even ‘these’ are children of God  
   A) Boys B) Girls C) The Gentiles D) The Jews

2. Where was Jesus born?  
   A) Jerusalem B) Nazareth C) Egypt D) Bethlehem

3. Who were looking for Jesus in the Gospel?  
   A) Women from Jerusalem B) The Scribes C) Herod D) The wise men from the East

4. What gifts did the wise men bring?  
   A) Gold B) Frankincense C) Myrrh D) All of the previous

5. Why didn’t the wise men return to Herod?  
   A) They were warned in a dream  
   B) They were lost on the way  
   C) They were running late  
   D) They were called back to their country

**Resource:** FRTONY HOMILIES, SUNDAY WEBSITE—ST LOUIS UNIVERSITY, LPI, SERMON CENTRAL, CATHOLIC BRAIN