

The Epiphany of the Lord

Year A, 2026

Is 60:1-6

Eph 3:2-3, 5-6

Ps 72

Mt 2:1-12

The way of wisdom: wonder

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. Epiphany is a Greek word that means something like to make a striking appearance, to manifest, to show forth. An epiphany was also a kind of ancient festival held to commemorate the appearance of a god at some particular place. So it is easy to understand how the appearance of a star that led to Christ's being manifested to the magi came to be called the Epiphany of the Lord.

Epiphanies were often associated with light, light being essential for seeing what is being made manifest, what is being revealed. Hence the star appears, and by its light, Christ is made known to the magi. The prophet Isaiah, too, as we heard in our first reading, foretells this wondrous event with words that are filled with light: splendor, light, shine, glory, radiance. Isaiah calls out to Jerusalem: "*raise your eyes and look about*" for "*your light has come*" and "*the glory of the Lord shines upon you.*" While darkness covers the peoples and nations of the earth, the Lord God shines out with glory in Israel.

But this light is not just for Israel. This light is meant to manifest God's salvation to all peoples. In Luke's gospel, we read of old Simeon, to whom the Holy Spirit had promised that he would see the Messiah before he died. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem, Simeon took the child Jesus into

his arms and blessed God, thanking him for letting his old eyes see his salvation, which Simeon calls “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel*” (Lk 2:25ff). For Israel and for the gentiles.

The magi are gentiles. They are non-Israelite wise men, priest-scholars. In song, they are called kings. And these foreign seekers of truth are among the first to whom Christ manifests himself. Astonishingly, Jesus appears to them before he appears to his fellow Israelites. The magi follow Christ’s star and see his light and recognize Jesus as king of Israel even before the people of Israel do: “*Where*,” the magi ask, “*is the newborn king of the Jews?*”

This question is the first recorded words of the magi. These wise men, these priest-scholars want to know. Though they are men of great learning, yet they approach the object of their research with humility. They lead with questions rather than with answers. And when Herod assembles “*all the chief priests and scribes of the people*” to inquire of the magi “*where the Christ was to be born*,” the magi share their knowledge freely and generously, just like they will freely and generously bestow gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh upon the Holy Family.

Knowledge and truth, are these not great gifts? And how remarkable is it that these foreigners end up teaching the most learned men in Jerusalem about their own new-born king? And they do it by citing the Jewish scriptures, the prophet Micah: “*But*

you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, least among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel" (5:1).

How is it that the revelation of God's Son, foretold in the scriptures, was missed by the chief priests and scribes and that the mystery of God's salvation was first made known to foreigners? Many things could account for this, but I suggest that it could well have been a lack of inquisitiveness, a dearth of curiosity, a deficient sense of wonder in the leaders of Israel.

When you think you have all the answers, when you think your position or pedigree or your power give you access to truth, knowledge, and understanding, when you imagine that your pet theories explain everything, it's then that you stop being curious and inquisitive and you grow dull. Complacent certainty: you stop listening to any voice but your own – and you grow disobedient. And such disobedience can end up in disloyalty. This kind of hardheadedness and hardheartedness earn the rebuke of God, who commanded his prophet Isaiah to preach to his disobedient people so as to confirm them in their complacent arrogance: "*Make the heart of this people sluggish, dull their ears and close their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart understand, and they turn and be healed*" (Is 6:10).

The older we get, the more fixed in our ways of being and thinking, the more likely this is to befall to us, unless we have the disposition of little children (Mt 18:3), who are born explorers, who are eager

to know and to understand, who are unabashed about learning new things, who revel in wonder when something new is revealed.

When this childlike wonder is found in adults, it leads to wisdom. And the magi are examples of this. Filled with wonder, the magi have questions, and they set out on a quest to find the answers to their questions. There is nothing of complacency or arrogant certitude in the magi.

Those who are truly wise have more questions than they have answers. Even so, the wise have many, many more true answers than the most intelligent fool. The fool, though, in his arrogance, will readily give you all his answers, whether you asked or not, whether or not his answers are even true or useful. It is a sign of wisdom that ready answers are rarely given, even when asked. The fool gives answers in order to impress you. The wise are impressed at you when by their questions you arrive at the answer yourself. This is one way to tell true wisdom from arrogant folly.

What's more, unlike the arrogant fool, the wise typically do not sneer or jeer. Neither are they condescending or dismissive. Such displays of arrogance, that is the domain of fools. This is another way of telling wisdom from folly, the wise from the fool.

But back to wonder, which leads to wisdom. The magi had that childlike wonder. They saw a star, and it stirred them to wonder and delight. They set out to explore, they “[traversed] afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.” Not

because they had answers, but because they had questions. For all their learning, for all their position and power and prestige, they still relished the adventure of discovery. They were eager to find out. And when they did, they “*were overjoyed*,” the gospel tells us. And they were grateful. So grateful, in fact, that they lavished gifts upon the ones who brought them such joy, “*for great in their midst was the Holy One of Israel*” (Is 12:6). In him they rejoiced and found their glory (Is 41:16), the one who would teach them how to prevail and lead them on the way they should go (Is 48:17).

Herod and his ilk, on the other hand, are not grateful, but resentful. And this is another test by which we can distinguish the arrogant from the wise. The wise will beam with gratitude; the arrogant will glare with bitterness.

What I’ve been trying to get at is just how foundational wonder is to true wisdom. If we lose our sense of wonder, we can so easily fall into arrogance or apathy, into alienation and anomie. And then that little Herod that lurks within will manifest himself in all his inhumanity, brutalizing everything and everyone. Herod is no way to be, no way to live. The magi, on the other hand, show us a better way of being, of living, one that leads to the source of wonder itself, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.

In the book of Sirach, which is part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we read that “*fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*” (Sir 1:14), and “*the fullness of wisdom*” (Sir 1:16), and “*the*

crown of wisdom" (Sir 1:18), and "*the root of wisdom*" (1:20) and that "*to those who fear the Lord, he gives wisdom*" (Sir 43:33). Fear of the Lord can also be understood and perhaps translated as being in awe of God. And awe is awfully close wonder. So it's not really a stretch to say that wonder is the beginning of wisdom, and the fullness and crown and root of wisdom, and that all who stand in wonder before God, to them God gives wisdom.

So wonder is the way to wisdom. After all it was a star of wonder that led the magi to Christ, whom St Paul calls "*the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (1 Cor 1:24), who calls both Jew and gentile alike to seek his face so that he can manifest himself to them, and, once they have found him and seen him, to believe, and believing, to be saved.