

January 8 Sunday

EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

Reading 1IS 60:1-6

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory. Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses. Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.

Responsorial Psalm PS 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

R. (cf. 11) **Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.**

O God, with your judgment endow the king,
and with your justice, the king's son;
He shall govern your people with justice
and your afflicted ones with judgment.

R. **Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.**

Justice shall flower in his days,
and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

R. **Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.**

The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts;
the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.
All kings shall pay him homage,
all nations shall serve him.

R. **Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.**

For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
the lives of the poor he shall save.

R. **Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.**

Reading 2EPH 3:2-3A, 5-6

Brothers and sisters: You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit, namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation. 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.

Alleluia MT 2:2

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel MT 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: *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.*" Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Reflection:

WE CELEBRATE TODAY the second of four great manifestations of God in our midst. The word 'epiphany' comes from Greek and it means a 'showing' or 'manifestation'. We call today's feast the Epiphany of our Lord but the term could equally well be applied to the other two. The first of these four manifestations we already celebrated on December 25, when God revealed, manifested himself to us in the form of a helpless, newly-born infant. He is

presented as born homeless and in poverty and surrounded by the poor and outcasts (that is what the shepherds represented). This manifestation fits in very well with the theme of Luke's Gospel and it is he who tells this story. In today's feast, we see the same recently born baby in similar circumstances but the material and social surroundings are hardly touched on. The emphasis here, as we shall see, is different. Here are strangers, foreigners, total outsiders coming to give royal homage to this tiny child. This will be the theme of Matthew's Gospel. "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations." Today's feast, we may ask is the story of the "wise men" a factual report or is it just that - a story? Primarily, it is a story. A report is concerned with hard facts - the temperature dropped to 10 degrees last night or there were 10 millimetres of rain yesterday. But a story, especially a biblical story, is concerned much more with meaning. In reading any Scripture story, including Gospel stories, we should not be asking, "Did it really happen like that?" Instead, we should be asking, "What does it mean? What is it saying to us?" The truth of the story is in its meaning and not in the related facts. Certainly in this story the facts are extremely vague and not at all sufficient for a newspaper or TV news report. The standard questions a newspaper reporter is expected to be able to answer are: Who? What? Why? When? Where? How? In this story it is difficult to give satisfactory answers to these questions. Although Jesus is still an infant and still in Bethlehem, we do not know how long after his birth, this incident is supposed to have taken place. We are not told because it does not matter; it is not relevant to the meaning of the story. (Compared to Mark, Matthew is normally notoriously short on details.) Who were these "wise men" and where did they come from? In the Greek text they are called *magoi* which is usually rendered in English as "Magi". Magi were a group or caste of scholars who were associated with the interpretation of dreams, Zoroastrianism, astrology and magic (hence the name 'Magi'). In later Christian tradition they were called kings ("We three kings of Orient are...") under the influence of Psalm 72:10 ("May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!"), Isaiah 49:7 ("Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves") and Isaiah 60:10 ("Their kings shall minister to you"). We are not told what their names were or how many of them there were. Tradition settled on three, presumably because there were three kinds of gifts. And they were also given names -- Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. Caspar was represented as black and thus they were understood to represent the whole non-Jewish, Gentile world which came to Christ. We are told, too, that they came "from the east". This could be Persia, East Syria or Arabia - or indeed any distant place. The Asian theologian, Fr Aloysius Pieris, points out the significance for Asians that it was wise men from the East and not the local wise men who recognised the light that led to Jesus*. As part of that homage they offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts seem inspired by Isaiah 60:6 quoted in today's First Reading, "They shall bring gold and frankincense". In later tradition, the gold came to symbolize the kingship of Christ, the incense his divine nature, and the myrrh his redemptive suffering and death. They also came to signify virtue, prayer and suffering. All in all, today's feast is telling us that for God there are no foreigners, no outsiders. From his point of view, all are equally his beloved children. We all, whatever external physical or cultural differences there may be between us, belong to one single family which has one Father, "our" Father. It means that every one of us is a brother and sister to everyone else. There is no room for discrimination of any kind based on nationality, race, religion, class or occupation. There cannot be a single exception to this position. The facts of today's story may be vague but the message is loud and clear. We thank God today that there is no "Chosen People" whether they be Jews or Christians (or even Catholics). Let us try to understand more deeply God's closeness to us which is also a reason for us to be close to each other. There are no outsiders. All are called - be it the Mother of Jesus, the rich and the poor, the privileged and the lonely, the healthy and the sick, the saints and the sinners. Yet, we can become outsiders. We do that every time we make someone else an outsider, whether we do that individually, as a family, a community, or an ethnic grouping. To make even a single other person an outsider, that is, to deny them the love and respect which belongs equally to all, is to make an outsider of oneself. It is to join the ranks of the Pharisees, the chief priests and every other practitioner of bigotry. Finally, we might ask ourselves, what are the stars in my life? The wise men saw the star and followed it. The people in Jerusalem did not. How and to what is God calling me at this time? Where does he want me to find him, to serve and follow him? Some have their priorities already fixed and so have stopped or have never even started to look for the real priorities, the God-sent stars in their lives. That is like first making a right turn at a crossroads and then wondering where you should be going. Saint Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises speaks of people who get married first and then ask, "What does God want me to do?" This very day, let us stop in our tracks. Obviously, at this stage there are many things which, for better or worse, we cannot change, some decisions, right or wrong, which cannot now be undone. But it is not too late to look for our star and begin following it from where we are now. The wise men did not know where the star would lead them. They just followed it until it brought them to Bethlehem -- and to Jesus. They never, I am sure, regretted their decision. If we can only have the courage and the trust to follow their example, I doubt if we will have regrets either. If we have not already done so, today is the day to make that start.