

HOW AND TO WHAT IS GOD CALLING ME IN THIS NEW YEAR?

January 8, 2012

Feast of the Epiphany—RB7

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“We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” [Matt 2:2]

A. ISAIAH 60: 1-6-- The Context. This book dates to the period after the return of the people from Babylon, 537 – 500 B.C. While they were happy to return home, they were depressed at the magnitude of the reconstruction required and, they still sinned by acting from motives of avarice, greed and injustice to the poor. [RG, 232] **Today's portion.** The Church uses these verses on the feast of the Epiphany, for she sees in them symbols of her universality. [TCB,941]

B. PSALM 128: 1-5 --The Context. This is a royal psalm in which the Israelite king is the instrument of divine justice and blessing for the whole world. [TCB, 694]

C. EPHESIANS 3:2-3, 5-6 The Context: This letter was probably written in 60 A.D. after Paul's death. It examines the mystery of the church's mission to make God's plan of salvation known to the whole world. [RG, 430] **Today's text** reminds the church that the Gentiles are co-heirs to Christ's promise and they are included in the spiritual benefits promised to Israel. [TCB, 306]

D. MATTHEW 2:1-12--The Context: Most scholars conclude that Matthew was a Greek speaking Jewish convert to Christianity probably living at the end of the first century in Antioch and writing to a Jewish audience. Probable date somewhere between 70-90 A.D. Matthew has great interest in showing that Jesus is the promised Messiah. [RG 314, 315] **Today's pericope** tells the story of the visit of the Magi, astrologers in Matthew's rendition. It was a common ancient belief that a new star appeared at the time of a ruler's birth [TCB, 102]

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO ME PERSONALLY TODAY?

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."

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 millimeters 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.**

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. They were understood to represent the whole non-Jewish, Gentile world which came to Christ.

There is talk of following a star. Was there indeed at this time a comet or supernova which would be particularly meaningful to these men? Even so, how does one follow a star? Have you ever tried? How do you know when a star is "over the place" you are looking for? You could travel several hundred miles and the star could still be "over" you. Probably, we are wasting our time looking for some significant stellar happening. **The star is rather to be seen as a symbol: a light representing Jesus as the Light of the whole world.**

There really is not much point in trying to pinpoint facts here. We are dealing here with meaning and the meaning is very clear from the general context of Matthew's Gospel. **God, in the person of Jesus, is reaching out to the whole world.** More than that, the religious leaders of his own people, the chief priests and experts in the scriptures, although clearly aware of where the

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Messiah would be born, made no effort whatever to investigate. Yet Bethlehem was "just down the road", so to speak, from Jerusalem. King Herod, an ambitious and ruthless man (that is a fact of history), was prepared to go but only to wipe out even the remotest threat to his own position.

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. 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. [Frank Doyle, SJ]

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

What are the God sent "stars" in my life? What is God calling me to do this New Year?

Where and how does God want me to find him, to serve him, and to follow him?

Do I take the time to review the gifts of each day, to thank God for them and to ask his guidance?

Will I ask God's help and guidance before I set my priorities for this New Year?

[Sources: Scripture readings- *The Catholic Bible, NAB translation, Home Study Edition, (TCB)*, and its Reading Guide (RG); *The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh Translation, [JSB]* Jewish Publication Society; *The Jerome Biblical Commentary, (JBC)* 1968 edition; *Dictionary of the Bible (DB)*, J.L.McKenzie, SJ; *Daily Study Bible Series, Matthew (DSBS)*, Wm Barclay; *Sunday Scripture Reflections* by Frank Doyle, SJ at www.sacredspace.ie/livingspace. [Editor: Michael Hosemann].