

## The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord: The Journey

Who were they, these three men we call magi? Were they kings? Popular tradition refers to them as the three kings, and maybe they were. Certainly, their gifts were those one king would offer to another. The title "king" was used rather loosely in the ancient East. They may have been more similar to the medieval counts or dukes. The Hebrew prophets, particularly Isaiah, had foretold that kings would flock to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. So, it would be acceptable to consider them as kings.

Sometimes they are referred to as magi or astrologers. Were they astrologers? Well, not astrologers in the sense of Madame Take-your-money, who says whatever she figures would keep her cash flow solid. But they were astrologers in the sense that they studied the sky looking for the sign that the Golden Age would begin. Perhaps, they were more astronomers than astrologers. The ancient people believed that the birth of the Great One would be accompanied by rejoicing in the heavens. The Hebrew people also believed that nature would respond to the momentous event. Recent studies have shown that those east of Judea would have indeed seen a phenomenon in the sky, a star in their sense of the term, right at the time of the birth of Jesus. However that doesn't explain how on leaving Jerusalem they were overjoyed to find the star guiding them to Bethlehem and resting over the place where Jesus was. By the way, notice that the magi entered a house, not a stable. Maybe by the time they got there some people gave the Holy Family a room in which to stay. Or perhaps Joseph found a VRBO.

Were the three wise men? Certainly, they were wise, wiser than most men. They were willing to leave their lands, their comforts, and journey to find the great King whose birth was announced by the star.

And, how about this King Herod? Who was he? He was to be known as Herod the Great. His son, Herod Antipas, would be the king who would put John the Baptist to death and mock Jesus. The first Herod built up much of Jerusalem, including the new Temple, a wonder of the ancient world. This Herod was a fierce politician. His family came from the Roman province of Idumea, and had been pagan themselves. They became Jewish in order to rule in Palestine under the protection of Rome. So Herod was always suspected by the Jews as being a Jew in name only, but not committed to Yahweh. In 40 BC the Roman Senate declared that Herod was vassal king in Palestine, answering ultimately to Rome.

Herod spent most of his reign trying to protect himself from being overthrown. His own family was not safe from his paranoia. He sent his wife and son into exile. When his young brother-in-law was becoming too popular, he had a "drowning accident" in what archaeology has shown to be a rather shallow pool. Herod also had three more of his sons killed when he suspected them of plotting against him. Many modern writers repeat the probably apocryphal story that the Emperor Augustus remarked, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son." By the way, that was a pun, the word for pig in Greek was hios and the word for son was wehous. Since the Jews did

not eat pork, the lives of Herod's pigs were safer than those of his sons.

So when the three magi called on Herod and asked where is the new born King of the Jews was, all that Herod could hear was that once more his power was being challenged. You can understand the phrase, "He was greatly troubled and all Jerusalem with him." That he would send his soldiers to kill all the children born in the vicinity of Bethlehem is in perfect keeping with how he protected his reign. This Herod would die a year or two after the birth of the Lord.

Herod and the magi offer a study in contrasts. Herod was a man of the political world, fiercely holding onto his power. The magi were men devoted to finding the King announced by the star, even though they did not know who this King was or exactly where the star would lead them. Herod was a Jew in name but a pagan in all things. The Magi were pagans in name, but acted like sincere Jews seeking the One who was the summit of God's Plan for mankind.

Sixteen centuries later, the mystic and doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross, would reflect on his own life in a way that was similar to the lives of the ancient magi as well as the lives of all who seek the Lord. In "Songs of the Heart..." John of the Cross wrote, "I went without discerning and with no other light except for that which in my heart was burning."

And so, we journey to the Lord. Where exactly are we going to find Him? We really don't know. He may be in marriage. He may be in the priesthood or religious life. He may be in the life of the single determined to spread Christianity. He may be in children and Teens. He may be in a career. He may be in our caring for a sick spouse or relative. He may be in the outcast who reach out for us.

He is in all these and countless more places. If we are wise, we will spend our lives seeking Him out, wherever He is. And yes, we might get sidetracked. Yes, we might find ourselves seeking Him in the wrong place, like in the palace of a hypocritical King Herod. We may start a career that is wrong for us. We may have to break a relationship that is unhealthy for us. But if we are attune to God's Word, He will set us straight and direct us to the course we need to follow. I often come upon our young people who are struggling with the decision of what to do or where to go after high school. I tell them that they should pray over the decision. Then they should consider what would be the way or place that will prepare them to be their best selves and go with that direction.

"Where am I going with my life?" we ask ourselves. Ideally, our answer should be, "I am going to Jesus, wherever He might be." "When will I get there?" we also might ask. And we answer, "I will get there when the Lord decides that the journey of my life is complete." For none of us has arrived at the goal of fully embracing the Lord. We need to keep searching for Him throughout our lives. After all, our lives are journeys of love, There are always new places to find love.

We will all get to our Bethlehem's if we are open to God's call.

And, so, we journey, not alone, but guided, guided by an interior star, the voice of the One we love who calls to us deep within ourselves. And we go "without discerning and with no other light except for that which in our hearts is burning."

We pray today for the wisdom to seek the Lord.