

The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord: A Wise Journey

The famous English author of a hundred years ago, G. K. Chesterton, wrote a wonderful essay on three modern wise men. These three heard that there was a city of peace, a city where there would never be wars, or disturbances or pain. They also heard that they had to bring gifts to demonstrate that they were men of peace who deserved to live in this city. So they journeyed to this new Bethlehem with what, they were sure, would be gifts that would guarantee peace and earn them admission into the city. When they got to the gates of the city, St. Joseph was there to judge their gifts. The first modern wise man brought gold. He suggested that this could buy the pleasures of the world. People would not need war. They would buy all they ever wanted with the gold. The second modern wise man did not bring frankincense. He brought chemistry. He brought modern science. With his science he could drug the mind into a state of perpetual happiness. He could seed the soil and control the population. People would then have all that they would need so they would never go to war again. The third modern wise man brought a split atom, a new myrrh, a new symbol of death. His message was that anyone who opposed the way of peace would face death.

After they showed him their gifts, St. Joseph refused to let any of them enter. "What more could we have brought to demonstrate that we are men of peace," they protested. "We carry with us means to provide affluence, control nature and destroy enemies." St. Joseph whispered something into the ear of each man. Then they turned and went away with heavy hearts. Do you know what St. Joseph said to each of them? He said, "You have forgotten the child."

With all our technology, with all our affluence, with the power we have shown to dominate many forces of nature, we moderns are convinced that we are wise. The air no longer holds us to the ground. We can fly in it. The atmosphere no longer holds us to the earth. We can fly through it. The depths of the sea are no longer mysteries. We can put on scuba gear, or enter deep submersibles. Diseases like small pox and polio are distant, bad memories. We are convinced that we can find ways to ensure peace and happiness for everyone. We are convinced that we are wise. But we have forgotten the child. Peace only comes through the Prince of Peace. Men cannot create peace apart from God.

"Wise men still seek him," the old Christmas card declares. Are we wise? Do we seek him? Or do we have all the answers in our technological pockets? We Christians must be convinced that unless our thoughts are Christocentric, revolve around the Lord Jesus, not only do we not have the answers, we don't even know the questions that need to be asked. Let me demonstrate this. Although the advance of technology continues and this can and does benefit humankind, is the unbridled use of technology acceptable? Those who have turned technology into their god, do not question technological advancement. Those who seek Christ in all aspects of life do not bow down before a techno-god. Those who seek Christ must ask questions that those whose god is technology don't even consider. For example, some do not even

think that there would be anything wrong with cloning if by doing this a kidney or other internal organ could be provided for a dying child. They do not even bother to ask whether it is moral to bring another child into the world for the sole purpose of harvesting his or her organs. Perhaps, that is a future technology. Here is one that should raise questions for us right now: Is it morally right to use science to produce multiple conceptions in a petri dish, and then have to decide if we should discard conceived children or have multiple births with critically low birth weights? Those who do not question technology would laugh at that question. Actually, they would not even ask it.

Let's go back to the magi of today's Gospel. We call them magi, wise men, and kings. Which were they? They were probably all three. The term magi refers to Persian priests who could interpret dreams. They were also astronomers and astrologers, people who sought God's message to humans in the stars. They were probably Kings because their arrival in Jerusalem created quite a stir and earned them an audience with Herod. They may have been leaders of various groups of people or of areas of Persia. We really don't know. We do know that they were wise men. A wise man is attuned to the will of God and puts it into action. We always consider that there are three magi because they brought three gifts, one from each magi. The names Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar appeared somewhere in tradition.

They sought the newborn King of the Jews. Now this was Herod's official title, King of the Jews. So you could see why they thought Herod would know where the baby was. They assumed that the child was a member of the King's family. We can also understand why Herod was upset. He realized that there must be a threat to his position out there, somewhere. He was correct. There was someone out there who would be called the King of the Jews. In fact in this same gospel, the *Gospel of Matthew*, this is the title that was put over Jesus' head when evil crucified Him.

The magi sought to do homage to the newborn king, and did so when they found him in that house in Bethlehem. Doing homage means to make an action of submission before a person of great dignity and authority. A person would bow or prostrate himself. Homage is the proper attitude of humans before God. We continue this when we enter Church and genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament.

The magi sought the newborn King of the Jews to do him homage. We also seek the Lord. Why? Why do we seek him? We seek him because we want him to be our king. We want him to be the focus of our lives. We are not satisfied with just calling upon him when we need him in times of crisis and challenge. We don't just call out to Jesus when a loved one is hurting, or has died, or when we have strife in our family, or when we need help at school or at work. We call out to him every day to be the center of our lives. This takes courage and determination. We are tempted to say, "Lord, I need you here in my life, but not there. I need you in the hospital, but not at that morally questionable party." It is easy for us to ask the Lord to be with us as we care for a sick person, but not with us when we go with a person with whom we sin.

Look, we know that we can't just call upon God some of the time, and ignore him the rest of the time. We don't want a God who will leave us alone so we can join in with the sin of the world. We want a God who will help us conquer sin, conquer sin in the world and conquer sin in our lives.

And so, we also, like the magi, do him homage. We prostrate ourselves before God and we proclaim with our hearts, with our words, and with our lives, "You are the Holy One. You are Our God."

Like the magi we must go on a journey. Our lives must be a journey seeking the Presence of the Lord. We journey with the magi to those Bethlehems where we can find the Lord.

May your journey and may my journey be safe, beautiful and full of the love of God. May it be a journey of the wise.