

Last week's article took up the topic of the Epiphany. All of Sacred Scripture is meant for our careful instruction so that we can know how, who, and what to be in order to get to Heaven. The visitation of the wise men is not only recorded for all generations to ponder and learn from until the end of time, but it is held up as a special Feast in the Church as well, thus demanding even more of our attention.

Last week's article started with the prophecies about our Lord that were fulfilled with the Epiphany. PARENTS: study those prophecies, commit them to memory, and tell your children about them every Christmas. Tell them like you would tell a compelling story (making sure they know it's not just a story) and they will remember them. The prophecies are striking, they wow us, they tell us there is a God and Jesus is Him, something that cannot be taken for granted in our own times. Anchor the faith at a young age.

The question of who these Magi were was also taken up, ending with the question of: what were they like? What were their characteristics, their interior disposition? Pope Benedict comes to an essential feature of these wise men: They were **people of unrest**, people of hope, people on the lookout for the true star of salvation.

For church-going Catholics, this is perhaps the most important message of the Epiphany, this particular interior characteristic or disposition of the Magi. What does Pope Benedict mean by "people of unrest?" He doesn't mean that they were anxious, worried, or fretting around; nor does he mean that they were irritated or frustrated or any other such thing. What he means is that they were not satisfied with the knowledge, truth, wisdom, and understanding that they had, even though they had more than most. Their unrest was an eagerness, they were eager to find the depths of truth, of reality. They had excitement about it, it stirred them up inside, they were so desirous of finding ultimate truth, ultimate reality, that they sought it with earnest, desirous enough that they set out on a crazy journey to a foreign land, following a star that promised to lead them to what they sought.

To help see the utmost importance of this, consider a contrast. Recall their stopover at the palace in Jerusalem. They had lost sight of the star so they stopped to ask Herod (the supposed king of Israel) where the King of the Jews was to be born; they were asking for directions. Herod (who wasn't even really Jewish) didn't know so he called the Jewish Scripture Scholars and they said Bethlehem. Now obviously those Scripture scholars knew all of the prophecies that had been made about the birth of our Lord – kings from the east coming to pay homage, the star, and so on. And now they actually see the 3 kings, they hear that they've come from the East to pay Him homage, they see the gifts they've brought – in other words, they saw and heard all of the prophecies that were made being fulfilled right before their very own eyes, and they did...what? NOTHING, nothing at all. They did not move. They did not eagerly grab some things for a trip and say: hey, we're coming with you. They didn't follow the wise men, they just didn't do anything, they didn't respond at all. The reaction of the *Jewish Scripture scholars* was the exact opposite of these wise men from *pagan* lands. They were not stunned or amazed or awed by the fulfillment of the prophecies that was occurring right before their eyes, they were not eager to go and see more – they did nothing, they simply did not respond.

My dear fellow Mass-attending Catholics – which are we? The wise men or the Scripture scholars? How easy it to have the same response as the Scripture scholars. How often it does happen to church-going Catholics today, or perhaps *has* happened down through the ages? Over and over again we come to the greatest, most mysterious, and awe-filled event on the face of the earth – the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; over and over again we hear the teachings of God Himself and yet with little or no impact, it simply does not move us. It does not move the person to seek the Lord more and more through greater prayer, study, pondering of the mysteries, better and more frequent Confession, devotional practices, reform of life, growth in virtue and so on.

To be like the wise men or the Scripture scholars is a basic, fundamental choice in this life. Will I respond or not? Just showing up, just having some information, is not enough. This is the example, teaching, and choice that our Lord holds up for us with the Epiphany. He is pleading with us to become like the Magi, to really seek.

Let us come back now and touch on a few more aspects of the Epiphany. Recall that the Gospel says: Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. Why was Herod "troubled?" Well, while the Roman Emperor was

the supreme ruler of the whole Roman Empire – which now included Israel – he would have under him “kings” appointed to govern various territories. Well Herod was installed as the “king of Israel” but he was not a genuine king of Israel. For one thing, he was not even really Jewish. He was an Idumen, which you might say was a sort of cousin to the Israelites. Israelites were descended from Jacob (grandson of Abraham), while the Idumens were descended from Esau, Jacob’s twin brother. So Herod was not only not descended from David, (only a descendant of David could be a true king of Israel) he wasn’t even an Israelite per se, *and*...Herod knew it. So when he hears about the true King of Israel being born, he feels a serious threat to his false kingship. That explains why Herod was troubled, but why all of Jerusalem? Because word spread amongst the people of Jerusalem and they knew what Herod was like – he was a madman in many ways but especially when it came to clinging to that which was not his to have, his so-called kingship. Herod had had even members of his own family killed when he got the idea that they were some sort of threat to his phony kingship. Pope Benedict XVI hones in on this – that all Jerusalem was troubled with Herod – and makes a simple yet profound statement:

**“From the perspective of faith [the star] is a star of hope, from the perspective of daily life [it] is merely a disturbance, a cause for concern and disturbance.”**

For anyone who takes seriously the narrow path, following our Lord, His teachings, and commands, this needs no explanation. For anyone who does not, there is probably no explanation that is sufficient. It is, nonetheless, important for us to hear this plain, simple truth revealed by God, brought out by the Epiphany. The lives of the saints bear out this truth. The important thing is to realize the truthfulness of both of these things – star of hope, star of disturbance – they go together. Yes, when a person sets out to follow the Lord, there is great hope, and it will also entail personal sacrifice, a willingness to endure all – the “disturbances” that come with it. Expect them to come, don’t be shocked by it. The nature of these “disturbances” are manifold but they can be put into 2 general categories – exterior and interior ones. The exterior ones come from outside of ourselves – from people like Herod or just from the various circumstances of life. But following that star will also cause interior disturbances, one of which is a deep recognition of, and sorrow for, my sins. Let that happen.

Before leaving the stopover in Jerusalem note one more thing. The star – something physical, an observation – could lead the wise men only so far. It was/is something good but then they had to stop and consult the direct Word of God. Likewise in our lives here. Our own thinking can only take us so far and we must be ready to seek guidance from Revelation. This too is an act of humility. You cannot find the Lord without it.

In the small amount of space left, perhaps we can take up the subject of the star. What was this star? Was it an actual star or something else? We can start with a couple of basic things that are for sure true. Whatever it was, it *was* a *visible reality*; “the star” is not just figurative language. The Magi directly observed some sort of light in the sky. The second thing that is apparent is that whatever it was it had to be something exceedingly rare and unusual otherwise the wise men would not have set out to follow it. God puts out signs for us to follow but we won’t see them or follow them unless we are already seeking Him with sincere heart. Now what was this star? This is an unanswered question that has been kicked around for almost 2,000 years. There are basically 2 general lines of thought. A number of the Church Fathers, St John Chrysostom for example, believed it was an angel, appearing as a star or bright light, and the angel moved with the wise men, guiding them to our Lord. Another line of thought is that it was an actual astronomical phenomenon. Johannes Kepler is a well known mathematician and astronomer from the late 1500’s and early 1600’s. Kepler speculated that the star seen by the wise men was a particular arrangement of the planets, combined with a supernova. Similar speculations have been put forth by later astronomers as well. And of course it could have been simply a one-time only act of God. Whatever exactly the star was, what can be drawn out of it? Here again, Pope Benedict presents perhaps the most profound point. The star reminds us that the entire cosmos, all of Creation, speaks of God and even more specifically of Christ. The star reminds us that this whole world was created as a stage to worship God, to forge relation with Him and thus reach our true fulfillment. This is exactly what we see with the wise men – the cosmos, combined with Revelation, led them to the Lord, and they paid Him homage.

The word Epiphany means a great manifestation or sudden insight. Why is the visitation of the Magi called the Epiphany? Because God is manifesting Himself to the whole world, even to the nations. *God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*