

EPIPHANY – January 3, 2010  
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Today we join those magi who followed the star in order to worship the newborn Christ child. We celebrate this feast of the Epiphany, a word of Greek origin that means ‘appearance’ or ‘manifestation’. This feast finds its origin in the mid-third century and comes from eastern Christianity; in other words, Epiphany has been observed as a special feast day in the Church even longer than has Christmas which emerged as a major feast only in the fourth century. It has been traditional on this feast to recall two other ‘appearances’ of Jesus as Son of God and Savior of the world: 1) Jesus’ baptism by John in the river Jordan (remember the Father’s voice from the clouds declaring Jesus to be his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased), and 2) the wedding at Cana where Jesus performed his first public miracle (changing water into wine).

The magi represent the Gentile world, and so their adoration of this baby born of Mary affirms the fact that Jesus ‘appears’ or is ‘manifested’ as the Savior of the whole world and not just of the Israelites. The prophet Isaiah makes that clear in our first reading: while urging Jerusalem (representing the Israelites, God’s chosen people) to ‘rise up in splendor’ because their light has come, he also proclaims that ‘nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance.’ In other words, this divine light shines for everyone, for the whole world. In the Preface for today’s Mass, right before we sing the “Holy Holy”, we will hear these words: “Today you revealed in Christ your eternal plan of salvation and showed him as the light of all peoples.” All peoples—not just one tribe or nation.

We know that God had been speaking through Isaiah and the other prophets for centuries in telling his people that he would send a Savior, the Messiah who would save the people from their sins. And at this time in Jewish history, the expectation and anticipation of the coming of this Messiah had been raised to a fever pitch. What is even more interesting, however, is that this sense of hope and expectation was present in other kingdoms, peoples and religions as well:

--centuries before the birth of Jesus, the ancient Greeks had some sense that someone of unique importance and power would come onto the world scene. In one of the dramas from that time comes these words: “Look not for any end...to this curse until God appears, to accept in God’s hand the pangs of your own sins.” Socrates, the great philosopher, said “Wait for a wise man who is to come, who will tell us how we are to conduct ourselves before God and man.”

--the ancient Hindus in their prayer would ask “When will the Savior come? When will the Redeemer appear?” Confucius expressed this same yearning in saying “The Holy One must come from heaven who will know all things and have power over heaven and earth.” The ancient Chinese also anticipated the coming of a special wise one who would come from the West; their writings spoke of a bright light that would herald the coming of this saint.

--and the Roman Empire, the dominant world power at the time of Jesus’ birth, had its own ‘prophets’ who looked forward to the One who was to come. The historian Tacitus said “it will not be long until Judea would bring forth one who would rule the universe”, while the poet Virgil referred to a virgin smiling at her infant son “under whom the iron age will come to an end” (that is, the rule of Rome itself).

I think it is fascinating to realize how many different peoples and empires had a sense that a very special “Someone” was coming, one who would make things right in the world and in the human heart in a singularly powerful and momentous way. When you consider all the prophecies from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) along with all these testimonies from other times in history and other parts of the world, the conclusion is more and more inescapable: Jesus the Christ is that One who the world needed

and was waiting for—he truly was the expectation of all the nations. And when he was engaged in his public work of teaching and preaching about the kingdom of God, he made that very clear; in John’s gospel, for example, he made that stirring declaration: “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is indeed the one and only Savior of the world: he could not have been more explicit about it, and his words were and remain confirmed by the historical facts of his death on the cross and his rising from the dead.

Ever since the time of Jesus’ earthly life, the Church he established has been proclaiming that same bold message—Christ alone is Savior, and of the whole human race; in fact, making that proclamation is the reason for the Church’s very existence. That is so important to remember and affirm, especially in these times when there are so many attempts to minimize or relativize the message and person of Jesus. Even at this time of the year, in this Christmas season we hear the annual arguments about whether we should say “Merry Christmas” (thereby affirming the centrality of Christ) or something more generic like “Happy Holidays” or “Season’s Greetings”.

Of course we need to respect the beliefs of others whether or not they believe in Jesus as Savior as we do; of course neither we as individuals nor as Church can force others to accept Christ. But that does not mean we hide our belief in Jesus or our love for him and our desire to live out his call to discipleship and evangelization. Are we willing to witness to our faith; are we willing to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth that Jesus calls us to be, or do we put our faith in a box and keep it hidden as if we are afraid to take a stand or out of an inordinate fear of giving offense? Let’s not forget the reason for this season and for our faith: Jesus was born of Mary according to the plan of God the Father in order to be our Savior. The light of that star guided the magi to that baby boy who was destined to be and is in fact the Messiah and Redeemer of all people, the expectation of all the nations. How blessed we are to have the faith to know that truth; may we have courage and desire to follow that star, that light of Christ wherever and for whatever he wishes to lead us.