

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY AND OF THE THREE HOLY KINGS

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January 6

EPIPHANY, which in the original Greek signifies appearance or manifestation, as St. Austin observes,¹ is a festival principally solemnised in honour of the discovery Jesus Christ made of himself to the Magi, or wise men; who, soon after his birth, by a particular inspiration of Almighty God, came to adore him and bring him presents. Two other manifestations of Our Lord are jointly commemorated on this day in the office of the church: that at his baptism, when the Holy Ghost descended on him in the visible form of a dove, and a voice from heaven was heard at the same time: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."² The third manifestation was that of his divine power at the performance of his first miracle, the changing of water into wine, at the marriage at Cana,³ "by which he manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him." Upon so many accounts ought this festival to challenge a more than ordinary regard and veneration; but from none more than us Gentiles, who, in the persons of the wise men, our first-fruits and forerunners, were on this day called to the faith and worship of the true God.

The call of the Gentiles had been foretold for many ages before in the clearest terms. David and Isaias abound with predictions of this import; the like is found in the other prophets; but their completion was a mercy reserved for the times of the Messiah. It was to him, who was also the consubstantial Son of God, that the eternal Father had made the promise of all "nations for his inheritance";⁴ who being born the spiritual king of the whole world, for the salvation of "all men,"⁵ would therefore manifest his coming both to those that "were near, and those that were afar off,"⁶ that is, both to Jew and Gentile. Upon his birth, angels⁷ were dispatched ambassadors to the Jews, in the persons of the poor shepherds, and a star was the divine messenger on this important errand to the Gentiles of the East; conformably to Balaam's prophecy,⁸ who foretold the coming of the Messias by that sign.

The summons of the Gentiles to Bethlehem to pay homage to the world's Redeemer was obeyed by several whom the Scripture mentions under the name and title of <Magi>, or wise men; but is silent as to their number. The general opinion, supported by the authority of St. Leo, Caesarius, Bede, and others, declares for three. However, the number was small, comparatively to those many others that saw that star, no less than the wise men, but paid no regard to this voice of heaven: admiring, no doubt, its uncommon brightness, but culpably ignorant of the divine call it, or hardening their hearts against its salutary impressions, overcome by their passions, and the dictates of self-love. In like manner do Christians, from the same cause, turn a deaf ear to the voice of the divine grace in their souls, and harden their hearts against it in such numbers, that, notwithstanding their call, their graces, and the mysteries wrought in their favour, it is to be feared that even among <them> many "are called, but few are chosen." It was the case with the Jews, "with the most of whom," St. Paul says, "God was not well pleased."⁹

The wise men being come, by the guidance of the star, into Jerusalem, or near it, it there disappears: whereupon they reasonably suppose they are come to their journey's end, and upon the point of being blessed with the sight of the new-born king: that, on their entering the royal city, they shall in every street and corner hear the acclamations of a happy people, and learn with ease the way to the royal palace, made famous to all posterity by the birth of their king and Saviour. But to their great surprise there appears not the least sign of any such solemnity. The court and city go quietly on in seeking their pleasure and profit! and in this unexpected juncture what shall these weary travellers do? Were they governed by human prudence, this disappointment is enough to make them abandon their design, and retreat as privately as they can to screen their reputation, and avoid the raillery of the populace, as well as to prevent the resentment of the most zealous of tyrants, already infamous for blood. But true virtue makes trials the matter and occasion of its most glorious triumphs. Seeming to be forsaken by God, on their being deprived of extraordinary, they have recourse to the ordinary means of information. Steady in the resolution of following the divine call, and fearless of danger, they inquire in the city with equal confidence and humility, and pursue their inquiry in the very court of Herod himself: "Where is he that is born king of the Jews? " And does not their conduct teach us, under all difficulties

of the spiritual kind, to have recourse to those God has appointed to be our spiritual guides, for their advice and direction? To “obey and be subject to them,”¹⁰ that so God may lead us to himself, as he guided the wise men to Bethlehem by the directions of the priests of the Jewish church.

The whole nation of the Jews, on account of Jacob’s and Danial’s prophecies, were then in the highest expectation of the Messiah’s appearance among them; the place of whose birth having been also foretold, the wise men, by the interposition of Herod’s authority, quickly learned, from the unanimous voice of the Sanhedrim, or great council of the Jews, that Bethlehem was the place which was to be honoured with his birth, as having been pointed out by the prophet Micheas¹¹ several ages before. How sweet and adorable is the conduct of divine providence! He teaches saints his will by the mouths of impious ministers, and furnishes Gentiles with the means of admonishing and confounding the blindness of the Jews. But graces are lost on carnal and hardened souls. Herod had then reigned upwards of thirty years; a monster of cruelty, ambition, craft, and dissimulation; old age and sickness had at that time exasperated his jealous mind in an unusual manner. He dreaded nothing so much as the appearance of the Messiah, whom the generality then expected under the notion of a temporal prince, and whom he could consider in no other light than that of a rival and pretender to his crown; so no wonder that he was startled at the news of his birth. All Jerusalem, likewise, instead of rejoicing at such happy tidings, were alarmed and disturbed together with him. We abhor their baseness; but do not we, at a distance from courts, betray several symptoms of the baneful influence of human respects running counter to our duty? Likewise in Herod we see how extravagantly blind and foolish ambition is. The divine infant came not to deprive Herod of his earthly kingdom, but to offer him one that is eternal; and to teach him a holy contempt of all worldly pomp and grandeur. Again, how senseless and extravagant a folly was it to form designs against those of God himself! who confounds the wisdom of the world, baffles the vain projects of men, and laughs their policy to scorn. Are there no Herods nowadays? Persons who are enemies to the spiritual kingdom of Christ in their hearts?

The tyrant, to ward off the blow he seemed threatened with, has recourse to his usual arts of craft and dissimulation. He pretends a no less ardent desire of paying homage to the new-born king, and covers his impious design of taking away his life under the specious pretext of going himself in person to adore him. Wherefore, after particular examination about the time when the wise men first saw this star, and a strict charge to come back and inform him where the child was to be found, he dismissed them to the place determined by the chief priests and scribes. Herod was then near his death; but as a man lives, such does he usually die. The near prospect of eternity seldom operates in so salutary a manner on habitual sinners as to produce in them a true and sincere change of heart.

The wise men readily complied with the voice of the Sanhedrim, notwithstanding the little encouragement these Jewish leaders afford them from their own example to persist in their search; for not one single priest or scribe is disposed to bear them company in seeking after, and paying due homage to, their own king. The truths and maxims of religion depend not on the morals of those that preach them; they spring from a higher source—the wisdom and veracity of God himself. When, therefore, a message comes undoubtedly from God, the misdemeanours of him that immediately conveys it to us can be no just plea or excuse for our failing to comply with it. As, on the other side, an exact and ready compliance will then be a better proof of our faith and confidence in God, and so much the more recommend us to his special conduct and protection, as it did the wise men. For no sooner had they left Jerusalem, but, to encourage their faith and zeal, and to direct their travels, God was pleased to show them the star again, which they had seen in the East, and which continued to go before them till it conducted them to the very place where they were to see and adore their God and Saviour. Here its ceasing to advance, and probably sinking lower in the air, tells them in its mute language: “Here shall you find the new-born king.” The holy men, with an unshaken and steady faith, and in transports of spiritual joy, entered the poor cottage, rendered more glorious by this birth than the most sumptuous stately palace in the universe, and finding the child with his mother, they prostrate themselves, they adore him, they pour forth their souls in his presence in the deepest sentiments of praise, thanksgiving, and a total sacrifice of themselves. So far from being shocked at the poverty of the place, and at his unkingly appearance, their faith rises and gathers strength on the sight of obstacles which, humanly speaking, should extinguish it. It captivates their understanding; it penetrates these curtains of poverty, infancy, weakness, and abjection; it casts them on their faces, as unworthy to look up to this star, this God of Jacob; they confess him under this disguise to be the only and eternal

God: they own the excess of his goodness in becoming man, and the excess of human misery which requires for its relief so great a humiliation of the Lord of glory. St. Leo thus extols their faith and devotion: “When a star had conducted them to adore Jesus they did not find him commanding devils, or raising the dead, or restoring sight to the blind, or speech to the dumb, or employed in any divine actions; but a silent babe, under the care of a solicitous mother, giving no sign of power, but exhibiting a miracle of humility.”

The Magi, pursuant to the custom of the eastern nations, where the persons of great princes are not to be approached without presents, present to Jesus, as a token of homage, the richest produce their countries afforded, gold, frankincense, and myrrh— gold, as an acknowledgment of his regal power; incense, as a confession of his Godhead; and myrrh, as a testimony that he was become man for the redemption of the world.

The holy kings being about to return home, God, who saw the hypocrisy and malicious designs of Herod, by a particular intimation diverted them from their purpose of carrying back word to Jerusalem where the child was to be found. So, to complete their fidelity and grace, they returned not to Herod’s court; but, leaving their hearts with their infant Saviour, took another road back into their own country. In like manner, if we would persevere in the possession of the graces bestowed on us, we must resolve from this day to hold no correspondence with a sinful world, the irreconcilable enemy to Jesus Christ; but to take a way that lies a distance from it, I mean that which is marked out to us by the saving maxims of the gospel. And pursuing this with an unshaken confidence in his grace and merits, we shall safely arrive at our heavenly country.

It has never been questioned but that the holy Magi spent the rest of their lives in the fervent service of God. The ancient author of the imperfect comment on St. Matthew, among the works of St. Chrysostom, says they were afterwards baptized in Persia by St. Thomas the apostle, and became themselves preachers of the gospel. Their bodies were said to have been translated to Constantinople under the first Christian emperors. From thence they were conveyed to Milan, where the place in which they were deposited is still shown in the Dominicans’ church of that city. The emperor Frederick Barbarossa having taken Milan, caused them to be translated to Cologne in Germany, in the twelfth century.

NOTES

1 St. Aug. Serm. 203, ol. 64, de div.

2 Matt. iii. 17.

3 Jo. ii. II.

4 Ps. ii. 8.

5 I Tim. ii. 4.

6 Eph. ii. 17.

7 Luke ii. 10, 11.

8 Num. xxiv. 17.

9 I Cor. x. 5.

10 Heb. xiii. 17.

11 Ch. v. 2.
