

EPIPHANY – A January 6, 2008

This story from Matthew's Gospel surely has to be one of the most exotic stories in all of Scripture. For one thing, it appears *only* in Matthew's Gospel and not in the other three. It reads almost like a fairy tale: it features exotic visitors, a wicked king, court intrigue, a mysterious star, precious gifts and a newborn child. What more could we want?

This is quite different from St. Luke's story about the infancy of Jesus, which has the shepherds and the gently rolling hills and the quiet stable and O Little Town of Bethlehem and so forth. St. Matthew has written a story full of turmoil, danger and suffering to remind us that Jesus came into a real world with harsh social and political threats, the same kind of world we live in today.

The three mysterious visitors are called astrologers, not kings, wise men or magi as we call them, and we are not even told their names. The names that we most often hear—Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar—do not come from Scripture and do not appear in any writings until centuries later.

Following a moving star, they do not actually visit a stable or manger, but Matthew tells us they enter a house. Whose house? We aren't told. They then offer rare and expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which are highly symbolic, and after a dream that one or perhaps all three of them had, they went back home, wherever that may have been, without stopping to see King Herod again. Regardless of the fact that it doesn't make a whole lot of sense, it's a great story because it's full of wonder and magic and mystery.

In spite of the mystery there is really a lot of brightness to this story, and we can see how appropriate that is at this time of year. We have just passed the winter solstice, that day in late December when the seasons turn. And although it is only the *beginning* of winter, it's the *end* of the lengthening darkness. We now enjoy a little more daylight each day.

Christmas itself is a feast of lights. We put lights on our Christmas trees and the outside of our homes, and at this time of year we are more likely to light candles and set a fire in our fireplace, if we're fortunate enough to have one.

In other ways, too, there is more light in our life. Often families are reunited; bonds of love and friendship are strengthened, and happy memories are recalled more brightly. These events of grace truly light up our lives.

In the Gospel, the magi are led to the child by the light of a star. We don't know if this really was a star in the sky, as the story tells us, or a symbol for some other kind of enlightenment. I don't think it matters, because either way it was by divine guidance that they found the child.

But the magi themselves. We may well ask, who really were these three visitors from afar? The truth is, it doesn't really matter who they *were*. What is more important is who are they *now*? And the answer is, the three astrologers are *us*. It's not hard for us to recognize ourselves in these weary travelers. When Matthew wrote this story, his intention was to use the three astrologers to represent the Gentiles, that is, all the non-Jews of the world, all the nations beyond Israel.

St. Luke's Gospel, you may remember from the Christmas readings, refers to the shepherds, who represent the Jews. But Matthew's Gospel—which doesn't mention those shepherds—tells us that these three foreigners came from distant lands to honor the child. So the astrologers

represent all the nations of the world, and this Epiphany reminds us that the Gospel was meant for the salvation of all people.

As I said a moment ago the magi represent us. Like them, we have been searching for God. Like them, we have been led by God to recognize the divine presence in a little child. Like them, we rejoice that God has come both to the people of Israel and to us.

In many countries, especially in Europe, Epiphany is a huge celebration. Schools and businesses are closed, and about 20 years ago I was fortunate to be in Austria on this feast of Epiphany. I was delighted to see that the children, in groups of three, walked through the streets dressed as the magi. But they also have a tradition of exchanging gifts on this feast because this is the day the three famous visitors brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the child.

At this time of year we do the same thing, although normally on Christmas itself. We exchange gifts with family and friends, and this very first Christmas was no different, it was a real gift exchange. But what the magi could not have foreseen was that they would receive even greater gifts than they gave. They received the fulfillment of their dreams, the goal of their long search.

Lucky for us, we participate in that same marvelous exchange of gifts. The greatest gift has been given to us by God, the gift of Jesus in our world and in our lives. What gifts do we bring in return? When we really care about people, we try very hard to find the gifts they will enjoy the most, the things they really want.

But what does God want from us? What do you give the God who has everything? Only one thing: the gift of ourselves, which means our hearts, our love, our obedience, our sincere and unconditional praise and worship. This is probably the hardest gift to give, and what makes it so valuable is the sacrifices we have to make in order to give it.

God has given us the freedom to choose to respond to the divine gift of love, or to reject it. Responding to God's love with our love is the best gift we can offer the child. The next time you look into a nativity scene, picture yourself there with those three mysterious travelers from a distant land and ask yourself two questions: first, What are the gifts God has given me? The second question is: What are the gifts I give to God?