

Epiphany

Sunday, January 5th, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-9; Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

On January 6th, western Christians celebrate the feast of Epiphany, which takes its name from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning disclosure, unveiling. Epiphany really stands as the highpoint of Christmas: it looks to *the mission of the Christian church*, in the light of the joy of the incarnation, of God become human, of Jesus as the light of the world.

The Magi

So let's hasten to the Gospel reading and focus upon what is central to the story of Jesus' birth at Epiphany: the magi, the wise men, as we call them today. What is it that they tell us about Christian mission?

Well, like most things, the explanation is not all that simple, not black and white. In fact, the church has interpreted the story of the wise men in two quite different ways. Let's have a look!

The first, has seen the story in linear terms; as one in which pagans come to the light from the dark. Let's remember that the wise men were generally understood to have been Persian astrologers from the East, people who studied the stars – something to which early Christianity had an ambivalence: great respect for the those who could master the stars and their meaning, but also fear, because of black magic. The apostle Paul for instance, has 'no truck' with magicians and in the *Didache*, a set of early Christian writings, outside of the New Testament, believers are instructed to "not act the part of a magos." So, the idea was this: that with the birth of Jesus, paganism and astrology had been overcome, and that these three wise men had *rejected* their astrology, their magic and followed Jesus. As Augustine put it, "they turned from superstition to adoration of the true God." You can imagine how powerful this message which sought to free communities from the dominance and fear of magic - a very real force to be wrestled with – was in the ancient and medieval worlds.

The second interpretation, one embraced in more modern times, but which has been sitting there in the text since the beginning, sees the story of the Magi in more nuanced terms, where reasoning is less linear and more surprising. Here, the Magi represent the pagan world – as in the traditional interpretation – but this time, a world that *is quite capable* of discerning Jesus for who he really is. In contrast to the Jews from the synagogue, people who have the scriptures, and who can plainly see what the prophets have said and predicted, but who seem blind to Jesus as the Son of God; the pagan wise men see, discern and understand. Here, the insiders are blind and deaf to the truth, but the outsiders are receptive. What is even more stunning in this interpretation, is something that does really stand out in the reading: namely that there is no mention, no mention at all, that the wise men are converted to the Christian faith. Augustine, as we have seen, assumes it, but does so with no real grounding. The Magi discern Jesus for who he is, sure, but then return to their homeland. They saw, they understood correctly, and they left.

What then can we conclude? Both interpretations – the earlier and the more recent – agree in the assertion that Jesus is the light, Jesus is the incarnation of God among human beings in history. The difference, lies in the assessment of the non-Christian in creation. The first interpretation, sees the world in dualistic terms, in black and white, and the priority for conversion from the darkness to the light, from the non-Christian to the Christian. The second interpretation sees the 'darkness' in a subtler way: the non-Christian 'darkness' is not entirely without merit, indeed, quite capable of seeing, acknowledging the Christ-child, the Light itself. In fact, if our Gospel reading is to be taken

seriously, the non-Christian magi see the light more clearly than those who claim faith, who claim to be 'of the light', to be believers.

Drawing the Threads Together

Let's try to draw these threads together by asking the question, how should people of the Gospel see, think about, relate to those who do not so subscribe, who have a different approach to life and the world? I would say the following:

First, our first duty as Christians is to see the world, God's world in positive terms, to see creation and all that is in it, hopefully, rather than to dismiss 'the other' as foreign or suspicious. As people who celebrate the grace or kindness of God, we too must look at the world and others, with what I call, '*kind eyes*'

Second, because of that starting point, I approach other religious traditions and indeed secularism, in a spirit of good-will and curiosity, looking for what I may learn from them, while also maintaining a critical mind at all times.

Third, that there is a difference - and this is something Christians often misunderstand - between truth in doctrine (what we believe about Christ) and truth in ethics (how we live) Yes, I hold to the truth of Christian claims about Jesus in his uniqueness. But that truth does not give me or us, a monopoly about truth in terms of how we should live. To my mind, that search for ethical truth - how we live together - is an on-going enterprise that is broader than the Christian community, that must include, a vast range of insights from other religious traditions, as well as the secular and the scientific. Living together is a cooperative venture, a venture of all people of good will, not just Christians alone.

So, the essence of this Gospel reading about the magi, the three wise men, on Epiphany is this: it is a call to openness. That mission is not about making people to be like us, making the Church an exclusive gang, *but more about recognition of the potential light already in the world, and the drawing of that light out to its maximum through Jesus Christ.*

Karl Rahner, put it this way: "*The Church in the future will not so much regard itself as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation, but rather as a vanguard of what the Christian hope is - [what it looks like] - beyond the Church*"