

## Epiphany 2007

The sun shines all the time; when it's dark here, it's shining on the other side of the planet. It's always sunny during the day; when it's overcast outside, it's just sunny on the other side of the cloud cover. But clouds and nighttime are also a reality, and it matters little to those of us here on the ground that the sun is always somewhere; what we care about is how much we actually benefit from it. And so at the end of a long, dark night travelers would welcome the break of dawn; it's much easier to move about and to move forward when you can see where you're going. And at the end of the storm, the light of the sun is a welcome sign that the storm has passed, and now it's safe. The sun is always there, but for some it is not shining. For some, it is far away, on the other side of the world away; for others, it may be right above, but it is obscured. We know that Christ is the light of the world, the Son whose light enlivens all things. But there are those who do not know of him still; those who live in the darkness of ignorance. And there are those who know of him, but whose knowledge is obscured by doubt, or by misinformation of who he truly is, or how he has come to save us; these live under the clouds of error.

The prophet Isaiah wrote to the Israelites returning from exile "rise up in splendor; your light has come! See, the darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the people, but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory." Upon you appears his glory. Today, on the feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the world. Him, who was first known only to the Father, then known to the angels, then known only to Mary, then to Joseph, and to Elizabeth and the yet to be born John the Baptist; then revealed to the shepherds; person by person, he is being made more and more known. The shepherds represent not only the poor and the lowly; they are the ones among the Israelites who are open to the revelation of God, and they will be the first to accept Jesus as Savior. But that was the feast of Christmas, today, on Epiphany, this light is made known to the entire world. Christ enters into our time and our space, and slowly dispels ignorance and error: day breaks, the clouds fade away; truth is attainable to all who will receive it. The Magi from the east learn of this new king, and are drawn to his light. God gives them the light of a star so that they may find the true light of the world. God is able to lead them because they are willing to be led; Herod could come into the light of all truth, but would rather reign in the darkness than serve in the light. His choice would become the prototype for all those to come who would choose to accept this child as their king, or reject him as their Savior: some would rather reign in hell, than serve in heaven.

The Magi, when they arrive, bear three gifts. Their gifts symbolize what Christians will offer to God in return for the gift of his Son. One brings gold: expensive and exquisite, affordable to the wealthy; affordable to kings. The gold represents the kingship of this child lying in the manger; but gold is, in a sense, the most perfect of the elements, the most pleasing and beautiful; hence, it represents in the Christian virtue, the perfection of our wills and most beautiful of our actions. Another magi brings frankincense; burned in liturgical rites, symbolic of our words and thoughts rising up towards the heavens, up towards God. So among Christians incense symbolizes prayer. The next magi brings myrrh, the bitter perfume used in the anointing of a body being prepared for burial; a foreshadowing of the tomb which awaits this child, and for the Christian, a symbol of the suffering, the redemptive suffering which, if we allow it, unites us with our Lord in his suffering and death.

And so the three kings bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and for them at last the darkness is lifted, upon them, too, God's glory shines. Because they come with these gifts to honor the Christ child, salvation is revealed to them, and they in turn will return to their own lands and spread the good news. They *arrive* with meager earthly gifts; they *return* with knowledge of God, and presumably faith. And so when we come with our gifts, we move increasingly from darkness, to light. When we come to our Lord bearing the gift of virtue: living according to his commandments, serving the needs of others, practicing generosity and self-control, when we do these things out of love of him, he is worshiped by our very actions. When we come into his presence and present him, not with incense, but with our own personal prayer; when we raise our minds and hearts to the things of God, to things which are holy, to the mysteries of his life; when we take the time to simply speak to him, and then take the time to listen to his reply, we chase away the dark clouds of error, and come to know him better. When we come before him, not offering myrrh, but offering our sufferings, our pains, our setbacks, our trials; loving him just as much after we have had to pick up our crosses as we did before they were given us; when we accept whatever losses with no less love for the God who gave us all that is good to begin with, then we let his light in us not only shine, but shine more brightly. But conversely, when we cultivate vice rather than virtue, and choose what is displeasing to God, even what's evil, over what is good; then darkness returns, and starts to overtake that light. When we give ourselves over to selfishness, focus only on ourselves and never on God and never on others, then the dark clouds which Isaiah said "cover the people,"

cover us once more—and we, who had drawn so close to God, find ourselves distanced from him again.

Now, as we draw to the end of the Christmas season, we may look back and examine what kind of a Christmas we had. We can reflect on the more secular items: how did we score with the gifts, how did our time with our families go this year, did we have fun, did we enjoy ourselves? But also, we ought to reflect on what we brought to Christ, and what we received in return. Did we bring him any virtue in our lives? Did we give him any prayer time? Did we accept our crosses, as being necessary for the path to redemption which we each, individually, must travel? And no matter what we brought to Jesus, have we thought about what all we received? Like Mary, we looked at him and saw the face of God. Like the shepherds, we looked at him and saw the fulfillment of the promises which God has made throughout time, that he would send one who would overcome evil, and deliver us from death. Like the Wise Men, we looked down on this little boy, and saw hope for us all: with his power and strength, there is no tragedy we can't rise above, no evil we cannot overcome. As many times as we attended Mass this Christmas season, as many times as we looked at the Host during the consecration, did we gaze upon him, just as did those who encountered him in the manger some 2,000 years ago. The words which Isaiah prophesied to the Israelites are even more true to us gathered here around this altar: the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. What we are given here makes the wealth of all the nations pale in comparison. This day, Epiphany, is the day of the real gift exchange: we offer God so relatively little, and he offers us so much in return: graces here on earth, and salvation awaiting us in heaven. Upon you, upon us, his light has shown. May we keep the darkness at bay, by remaining true to the teachings of our Lord, whose manifestations to all of us we celebrate this weekend with the Epiphany of our Lord.

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