

THE EMMAUS SERIES

Epiphany, ABC

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Opening their treasures they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh

Through the Incarnation, the generosity and mercy of God have finally appeared among us - in the life of one who is the very expression of the Father's greatness. And so, from earliest times the Church's Christmas celebration has made reference the Epiphany, or "Manifestation" of the Lord – symbolised in the story of today's gospel, but also realised in a special way in the Lord's baptism, and in the "first sign" he worked at the marriage in Cana. It comes as no surprise, when we hear it read, to find that today's first reading from Isaiah has a very ancient association with this festival: "Arise, shine out Jerusalem. The nations come to your light and kings to your brightness". This passage – from the writings of the Isaian tradition from the period after the return from the exile – expresses a vision of Israel fulfilling its role as "a light to the nations". Sharing in the "glory" (or incomparable greatness) of the Lord himself, the holy city will attract the wealth of the nations as the kings of the earth share in its rebuilding.

This Old Testament text and its parallels (see Ps 72:10) may have inspired the story recounted by Matthew in today's gospel. It is possible that an unusual astronomical event may also have contributed to its inspiration, calling to mind the prophecy of Balaam, "a star is emerging from Jacob" (Num 24:17). As it stands, the story is filled with symbolic meaning. The Magi represent the nations of the earth finding the Saviour of the world – in contrast to the scribes of Israel, familiar with the scriptures but not recognising their fulfilment; the gifts of the Magi are symbolic of the world's confession of faith in Christ – gold for royalty, frankincense for priesthood, myrrh for the one who is to die; notoriously ruthless Herod reminds us of earthly powers that obstruct the designs of God. We should note, especially, the significance of the words, "going in they saw the child with his mother, Mary". While Luke's narrative of Christ's conception and birth has Mary as its central figure, Matthew's account of the virgin birth is centred on Joseph. The words we have quoted, however, reflect the importance already given to Mary in the community that gave us Matthew's gospel.

The second reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians continues the theme of "manifestation", as it takes us into the depths of Paul's vision of faith in Christ. For Paul, of course, the God's dealings with the human family have come to a magnificent climax in what God has done for the world in Christ. As we read in the opening lines of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul interprets Christ's saving work as the revelation of a great "mystery" - the real purpose God has had in mind since the beginning of creation: "He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, to bring everything together under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth". Through his ministry, Paul has seen the realisation of what is symbolised in the story of the Magi – the whole human race is called with old Israel, to share "the same inheritance", to be "parts of the same body", to share in "promise" that the "gospel" has brought to the world "in Christ Jesus".

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