

The Three Lessons of the Wise Men

Epiphany of the Lord - Mt 2:1-12

Ave Maria Catholic Church, January 8, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

The name of the feast we celebrate today is Epiphany, which means “manifestation.” This is the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, whom the wise men of the East represent. These wise men did not receive the fullness of the prophecies given to the Israelites. However, they saw a star, and they followed it.

This is the first lesson the wise men teach us today: the visible and tangible things of this world show the presence and the power of the invisible God.

Were only a few people able to see the star of Bethlehem? No, there were many! It was not an exclusive and hidden sign. It was as visible and open as all the other stars in the sky! However, only three wise men saw the star and followed it. Beyond this material and sensitive sign, they discovered the voice of God and his call.

Let us go to the Bible. Let us open the Scriptures and read the first chapter of the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans. There, Saint Paul teaches: *“Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. [But men rejected them] As a result, they have no excuse; for although they knew God, they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools,”* (Rm 12: 20-22).

This is the foolishness of men. Sometimes, our reasoning reaches the point of absurdity. It especially happens when we reject God and anything coming from him.

Let us start with the simple questions: who made the wooden tables we have at home? A carpenter. And the bread that we place on our table? A baker. And the clock that hangs on the wall? A clockmaker. In other words, we accept that the table, bread, and clock did not simply appear without the action of a maker.

However, if we ask who made the universe with the order of the stars and planets, the earth with the day and night and the different seasons, the plants with their fruits and seeds, the animals that fill the sky, the lands, and seas; and then if we ask what is not a minor question: who made us, who made human beings, some people may surprise us with this answer: nobody! Of course, a wooden table is made by a carpenter, bread by a baker, a clock by a clockmaker, and the universe by nobody!

This is foolishness. Foolishness is to have the answer before our eyes and deny it. Then, we go to an Art Museum, and we say: “This is a Picasso,” “This is a Fra Angelico,” and

“This is a Leonardo DaVinci.” And before the most exquisite piece of art, the work of creation, we may say: “Anonymous Artist”!

Creation has the trademark of God. Creation has God’s sign of goodness, truth, and beauty. Even the most insignificant things, such as a mustard seed, it is sufficiently marvelous to give us an eternal lesson!

How many people live looking at the stars but do not find their Creator?! Let us remember the first lesson of the three wise men: they looked at the star and followed it!

Certainly, they saw something special in that light. Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that the star of Bethlehem was not an ordinary star. It did not follow the typical course of a star: first, it is seen in Persia and Chaldea. Afterward, it goes to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It appears, disappears, and appears again.

The wise men, through their knowledge, discover a message that most probably reminded them of Balaam’s prophecy. When the king of Moab asked Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam could not do it. On the contrary, he blessed it, saying: *“I see him, though not now; I observe him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel,”* (Numbers 24: 17).

The wise men understood that they were following the star of Jacob, the star of a king; for this reason, later, they will ask Herod: *“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage,”* (Mt 2:2).

The second lesson that the feast of the wise men brings to us is the disturbing example of the enemies of Christ.

Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes not only had the stars and the wonderful signs of creation, but they also had revelation. They knew perfectly what God had said. We read this in the gospel: *“When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ (Micah 5: 1-3)”* (Mt 3:6).

King Herod is the paradigm of those who have access to natural knowledge and revelation but prefer their own desires and passions. The star and the Messiah are not in their plans; therefore, even if he is Messiah or God, he must die. Herod rejected God’s plan of salvation, and as a consequence, he committed the most horrific act of killing innocent children. It is wise of people to learn from the actions of others. It is wise of people to imitate what is good and not what is evil.

The third lesson that the feast of the wise men brings to us is the teaching of faith.

The star that the wise men had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. Then, the gospel tells us: “*On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*” (Mt 2: 11).

Let us pause for a moment and understand. These men left their palaces and comfortable way of life, traveled through the desert, faced the rejection and incredulity of Herod and his court, and now they arrive at a manger where they find “a child with his mother.”

That was enough for them to prostrate themselves, do him homage and offer their gifts. Now, these wise men are guided by a more excellent light! It is not the material light of a star anymore, but the light of faith! Through the eyes of faith, they find the Emmanuel, *God with us!*

The Church asks us to associate ourselves with this adoration of the Magi. During Mass, the Church gives us the words of the gospel to read and Jesus in the Eucharist to adore and receive.

The Epiphany continues. It has been preserved and celebrated throughout the centuries. “We, too,” says St. Leo the Great, “are to taste the joys of the Magi, for the mystery which is accomplished upon this day is not to remain confined to it. Through the generosity of God and the power of His goodness, we in our day enjoy the reality of which the Magi had the first fruits,” (*Sermo 35, 6*).

Let us follow our star and discover God's providential action through the work of creation. Let us accept the light of the star and never reject it because of our passions and poor desires. Let us embrace the light that leads us to Jesus and be ready to prostrate, do homage, and offer our gifts to him. Amen