

Homily 1-4-15 (epiphany) Lindsay

The Epiphany is the feast of the celebration of the coming of the three wise men, or three magi, or three kings to pay homage to Jesus. The significance of this is, of course, the announcement of who Jesus really was to everyone, not just the Jews. We here in the west have traditionally pictured three wise men because there were three gifts presented to the baby Jesus, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But Matthew doesn't tell us how many wise men there were. In the Eastern Church there is a belief that there were twelve. There is even a tradition that gives them names: Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. There are many traditions about who the three magi represent, but it is agreed that they represent the Gentiles in some form or another. In other words they represent you and me. God's revelation henceforward is to be international, not relegated to one tribe in Israel.

Usually, when this event is depicted in art Jesus is shown as an infant. But this is a problem, because Matthew relates in verse 12 that Herod fell into a rage and ordered all the male children two years or under be killed 'according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.' So, it is quite likely that Jesus was two years old when the wise men visited the Holy Family. And why would Herod be so paranoid about a small child? Of course, he didn't like the idea of there being a new king of the Jews because HE was

king of the Jews. Like all tyrants and dictators it is inconceivable of him to think in terms of anything but raw power. It reminds me of the famous quote (or I should say infamous quote) from Joseph Stalin. One of his aides told Stalin that the pope wouldn't like an action he was taking in Eastern Europe. Stalin said, 'The pope? And how many divisions does he have?' In other words the only power worth having or talking about is power in the physical realm, in the sphere of the material. To Herod and Stalin both, the supernatural is a laughable superstition that doesn't exist. If you don't have the power to kill or force someone to do your will then you have no power at all. Stalin has been dead these many years and the Soviet Union has been dead since 1989, but the pope is still in Rome and the Church will be here long after Herod and Stalin and their ilk have been relegated to the dustbin of history.

The sign of the Epiphany of the Lord is the announcement that God has come to earth, not just for some people, but for all peoples everywhere. And not come in a way that anyone would expect. Think about it. If you were told that God was coming to earth what would you expect? I would expect earthquakes, storms, thunder and lightning, upheaval of all kinds. I wouldn't expect a small baby born to a young girl in an commonplace village in the middle east. But remember, God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. We are surprised that God would choose this way to

come to earth. But should we really be surprised? I don't think so. Revelation seldom takes place the way we would expect. Think about the apparitions of Mary throughout history: Juan Diego, Fatima, St Bernadette. Does Our Lady reveal Herself to the rich and famous, to kings and queens to even popes and cardinals? To people that would feel it their right to have a revelation from the Queen of Heaven? No, in almost every case these apparitions are given to the poor, the humble, the uneducated, the unsophisticated, the unexpected. To people that are going to have great difficulty convincing others that they have had a supernatural experience. And always the people that see apparitions are very reluctant to share the experience.

And so it was with Jesus. How would anyone guess who He was? The answer is: no one. Who Jesus was and is is a matter of revelation necessarily because the truth is so unlikely.

There is one other point to take from the Epiphany. Early Christians were scandalized by this story. Why? because of the role of the star. After all we are talking about astrology, and the evidence is that the magi were astrologers. For ancient peoples, astrology was an attractive option when it came to religious belief. The cold, indifferent regularity of the stars filled them with awe. But in the course of time this becomes oppressive. If you believe the stars foretell the future, you believe in fate. And there is nothing you can do

against fate. This is a reason why the Church is dead set against fortunetelling and astrology. It weakens belief in free will and gives rise to despair. Avoid both like nuclear waste. But the star in the story of the Magi breaks the determinism of astrology. The star leads us to Jesus, and therefore serves God's purpose. This star leads us to the truth and truth makes us free.