

The Epiphany of the Lord January 2, 2022

Ask anyone who the Three Kings are and they will be able to tell you that they were the men from the East who followed the star “to the place where Jesus lay”. The story of the Magi is among the best known of the gospels. Whether we know them as the "Three Kings" or the "Three Wise Men", they have a prominent place in every manger scene as well as in the story of Jesus' birth.

While today's gospel is among the best known stories in the Bible, it is also one of the most misunderstood. Who were these Magi from the East? The gospel does not tell us much about them. It is assumed that there were only three of them based on the three gifts which they brought to Jesus. But the gospel never tells us how many Magi there actually were.

We do know, however, that they studied the stars.

In Jesus' day, knowledge of the stars and their position in the sky was vital for travelers. There were few roads in the Middle East, especially through the desert. Only by charting their journey along the position of the stars could travelers be assured of not getting lost.

We also know that the Magi were not Jews. Like many pagans in ancient times, it is likely that they observed the stars to predict the future. They would have believed that their fate was written in the stars. Any unusual occurrence such as a comet or a large star would have gotten their attention.

And just such a thing happened. The Magi observed a star which foretold the birth of the King of the Jews.

As it is usually told, the Magi follow the star all the way to Bethlehem. But that is not how the story is told in the gospels. According to St Matthew, the Magi went first to Jerusalem. They needed to consult the Scriptures and the teachers of the Law to learn where they were to find this great king. The star only took them so far. They needed to turn to God's word to get the whole itinerary. If not for the prophecies of the Old Testament, they would have been lost.

The meaning for us who search for Jesus and seek to lead others to Him cannot be clearer. Without the Scriptures, we are lost. Relying on our own intelligence and experience, we can only get so far. Unaided by faith, we may become nice people. But God wants so much more for us. God wants us to know Jesus personally and intimately. He wants to reveal His love and power to us and use us to lead others to Him. Without the Bible as explained to us by the Church, we can easily lose our way.

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In today's world, we see just how true this is. Billions of dollars are spent on palm readers, astrologers and other spiritualists. Books on new age spirituality continue to be popular. Everyone is looking for the latest thing, but they are never satisfied. Their consciences tell them that something is missing, but they are unable to find their way back by their own intelligence. They need God's word to reveal to them that it is Jesus that they seek. To fill the missing piece in their lives, they need look no further than the Bible they have tucked away in some drawer and the neighborhood parish they pass on their way to work every day.

Today's readings, however, do not only contain a message for those who seek Jesus and do not know where to find him. There is also a message for us who claim to already know Jesus.

The Magi were seeking the newborn King of the Jews but did not know where to find him. The chief priests and the scribes knew where to find him, but they were not looking! You would think that many of them would have wanted to join the Magi on the trip to Bethlehem to witness the birth of the Messiah. But they were content to let their knowledge of the Scripture and their positions of authority replace their relationship with God. And so they missed out on the blessed event of Christ's birth.

Like those chief priests and scribes, it is easy for us who believe in Jesus to get complacent. We can make our relationship with Jesus and the Church simply a matter of following rules - going to Mass on Sundays, fasting on Good Friday, going to confession and so on. Rules are important, but they are not the whole life of faith. If we are not actively seeking God in our daily lives, then we are missing out. If our religion is not about a relationship with Jesus the Messiah then it is dry, lifeless and uninspiring.

As followers of Jesus, we have a responsibility to be a light for the world. If people are lost, we have to lead them back to Christ. Could it be that our society has turned to palm readers, new age gurus and other quacks because we as a Church have not shone forth in our lives the joy and peace that Jesus can give? Rules do not inspire people. Lives of faith and courageous witness do. If we are to be a light to those we meet, we have to ask ourselves - are we seeking to follow rules or are we seeking to follow Jesus? Only by following Jesus ourselves can we hope to ever lead others to him.

The Magi were not satisfied with merely knowing that a newborn King of the Jews had been born. They wanted to meet him, to pay him homage and to bring him gifts. We cannot be satisfied with just going through the motions when it comes to the practice of our faith. We must seek Jesus daily in a sincere manner. We must study the

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Scriptures and conform our minds and hearts to its teaching. Then we will become the stars leading others to the desire of their souls - Jesus the Messiah.