

Solemnity of Epiphany - Shining Star light for all peoples

Introduction

A land of passage, the subject of disputes, a crossroads of peoples, cultures, races and language! Palestine was invaded and occupied in turn by Egyptian Pharaohs and princes of Mesopotamia.



The desire to take revenge against the oppressors was cultivated for a long time by Israel (Ps 137:8-9), but retribution, retaliation, and revenge do not enter into God's plans. An anonymous prophet of the 3rd century B.C. instead reveals what God's dreams are. Here they are: "On that day the Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship the Lord together. Israel will be a third party with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing on earth. And Yahweh will bless them saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my creation, and Israel my heritage'" (Is 19:23-25).

A surprising, unheard and incredible prophecy: Israel is destined to be a mediator of salvation for her two historical enemies, the Assyrians and the Egyptians. A century before another prophet had announced: "The Lord will bring all the foreigners to his holy mountain and will give them joy in house" (Is 56:6-7).

The dream of God came true when a star appears in Israel, Christ the Lord, as the Lord has promised (Nm 24:17). His light drives away the darkness created by ancestral hates and convokes all the people in one family. This is the message of hope of the Epiphany, the feast of light.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"His light will make justice flourish, and peace abounds while the moon shines."

First Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6

To understand this passage, one of the most poetic in the Bible, two premises, historical and geographical, are necessary. Let us start with the first.

Commenting on the first reading of Christmas day we stressed the dramatic events of 587 B.C. that led to the destruction of Jerusalem. The humiliated city, reduced to a pile of rubble, appears, to the eyes of the prophet, as a widow who sits alone, dejected, desolated, without man and also deprived of children that have been kidnapped and deported to a foreign land.

Years pass and the hope of return of the exiles from Babylon become increasingly more hopeless. “The mistress of the nations” (Lam 1:1), “the pride of all the earth” (Is 62:7), who, in the moment of splendor, was compared to a fascinating maiden and courted by all, is now reduced to slavery, old age and disconsolate.

And now the geographical premise: Jerusalem is situated on a mountain on whose sides run two valleys, Gehenna and Kedron. In the morning when the sun rises, the city is surrounded by a bright light while around the valleys the darkness of the night continues. In Hebrew, Kedron means “obscure”.

In this historical and geographical context, here is what the prophet foresees.

It is dawn and the first ray of sun that rises from Mount of Olives illuminates the city. It seems like a dream: suddenly, Jerusalem, the withered widow, becomes a radiant, lovely, charming girl back then; a mantle of light surrounds it, like a suit of many colors. The prophet comes over and asks the city to throw away the signs of mourning, to stand up, to dry the tears because her husband, the Lord, who abandoned her because of her infidelity, now wants her back (v. 1,4).

It's not only the groom that is back. The children taken into exile are also given back to her. She just needs to raise her eyes to see them (v. 4). They come back from afar and the daughters are carried in the arms of those who had kidnapped them.

The vision continues. Now the prophet invites Jerusalem to look to the West: the horizon, among the waves of the Mediterranean. There appear mercantile ships of Phoenicia, Greece, Tarshish, the mythical country where the sun every day concludes its course. They are laden with gifts for her, the blessed one (v. 5). From the east comes a troop of camels and dromedaries. They bring the exotic products of the desert of Arabia, and of the fabulous kingdoms of Sheba: spices, perfumes, gold and whatever more valuable things.

What is the meaning of this great scene and why is it proposed for the feast of the Epiphany? The prophet had in mind a dream: the return of the deportees from Babylon and the reunion of all the dispersed of Israel. It is a dream not easy to achieve because the Israelites were now well settled in the land of exile and had no intention of facing new risks and uncertainties.

Some were not convinced and they settled for good in Babylon. Those who returned were deluded: they found Jerusalem still in ruin, no lights were on and from the desert and the sea people came but to plunder.

Despite the understandable dismay and bewilderment, Israel did not even think that the Lord had deceived them or had not fulfilled his promise. Even in the most difficult moments, the prophecy continued to be repeated: “The treasures of all nations will flow here” (Hg 2:7), “The kings of Tarshish and of the islands will bring offerings; the kings of the Arabia and Saba will offer tributes” (Ps 72:10).

That day came and the surprise caused by the intervention of God was so great that the prophet himself—If he was still alive—would have been surprised and amazed. The light coming from Jerusalem and has flooded the world is that of Easter. Since that day, all people have started their pilgrimage to “the mountain of the Lord” to the chosen community, the church. It was on the mountain (Mt 5:14), as a sign to all people, the beginning of the reign of peace on earth.

Epiphany means “appearance of the Lord.” In the East, where it started, this feast was instituted not to recall the Magi, but the birth of Jesus, the Christmas, the appearance of the light. In the West—where Christmas was celebrated on December 25—it was received in the fourth century and became the feast of the “manifestation of the light of the Lord” to the Gentiles and the universal call to all people to salvation in Christ.

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:2-6

The term mystery occurs twice in the Gospels—only in the famous phrase of Jesus to the Apostles: “To you is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Mk 4:11; Mt 13:11)—but it is used frequently in the letters of Paul and the Apocalypse.

With those words, it indicated in Israel God’s plan for the world, secret project, inaccessible, because prepared by him in heaven. The people—it was said—are not able to understand because the ways and thoughts of the Lord are far away from ours as the heavens are above the earth (Is 55:9). Therefore, we can never know what God has in mind, where he wants to lead us, what is the end, the goal of creation.

At the time of Jesus, it was thought that God would reveal his arcane projects to some persons through dreams, visions, raptures in the sky. In today’s reading, Paul says instead that the way to attain knowledge of the mystery is different. Given charge of revealing the thoughts and plans of the Lord are not the visionaries, but the preachers, the apostles, the prophets of the Christian communities. They receive from God the gift of full understanding of his mystery.

They come to understand why they are attentive to what the Lord accomplished in the midst of his people: they contemplate his deeds and thus receive the revelation of what He has in mind for all eternity. Paul included himself among the elected people who have discovered God’s plan and who were involved in its implementation.

In the second part of the reading (vv. 5-6), the apostle finally clarifies what the mystery consists of: it is the salvation of all people. The legacy of the promises made to Abraham and his descendants is not an exclusive privilege of Israel but is shared by all peoples. In the past generations, not even the most careful people had understood this plan of God.

They were convinced that the pagan nations are like nothing before God, nothing and vanity (Is 40:17). But now, in Christ, God reveals that even the Gentiles are “fellow heirs,” “partakers” of the promises and form, with the members of the chosen people, “one body” (v. 6).

This mystery of God has already been formulated by Paul in the previous chapter with moving words that are worth mentioning: “Remember—he says to the Ephesians—that you were without Christ, you did not belong to the community of Israel: the covenants of God and his promises were not for you; you had no hope and were without God in this world. But now, in Christ Jesus and by his blood, you who were once far off have come near. For Christ is our peace; he who has made the two peoples one, destroying in his own flesh the wall—the hatred—which separated us, making peace. He came to proclaim peace; peace to you who were far off, peace to those who were near” (Eph 2:12-17).

The initial passage of this letter fits perfectly into the theme of this festival celebrating the appearance of the light of Christ to the Gentiles.

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

From the earliest days of the Church, the magi have aroused keen interest among the faithful. They were one of the favorite themes of the early Christian artists: sarcophagi and paintings appear more often with the same scene of the Nativity.

Christians were not satisfied with the limited information that can be found in the gospel text. Too many details are missing: where they came from? How many were there? What were their names? What kind of transport did they use? What did they do after returning to their home countries? Where are they buried?

To answer these questions, many legends were born. It was said that they were kings. They were three: one came from Africa, one from Asia and one from Europe, and that one was black, one yellow and one white. Guided by the star, they met at the same point and then they walked together on the last stretch of the journey to Bethlehem. They were called Gaspar (the beardless youth and colorful), Melchior (the hoary old man with a long beard), Balthazar (the mature man with beard). They were clearly the symbols of the three ages of life. They were served by camels and dromedaries for the trip. After returning home, when they had already reached the ripe old age of 120 years, one day they saw the star again. They departed and found themselves back together in a city of Anatolia, to celebrate the Christmas Mass. On the same day, they were happy and they died. Their remains went round the world: first in Constantinople, then to Milan until 1162, when they were transferred to the cathedral of Cologne, Germany.

It is about pleasant and touching stories, but must be kept accurately distinct from the Gospel story as

not to compromise the message that the sacred text wants to communicate.

So let us begin to clarify some details that in our minds are closely linked to the figure of the magi, but which have nothing to do with what Matthew narrates.

First of all, it was not said that there were three, and that they were magi, nor kings. They had to belong to the category of diviners, astrologers, well known and appreciated people in antiquity for their wisdom, ability to interpret dreams, predict the future and read the will of God through the ordinary or extraordinary events of life. There is no wonder that Matthew has introduced the magi in his story. He has chosen them as a symbol of all the pagans that, before the Jews themselves, opened their eyes to the light of Christ.

With respect to the star, it was widely believed that the birth of a great person was accompanied by the appearance in the sky of his star: big for the wealthy, tiny for the poor, blurry for the weak. The appearance of a comet was thought to be a sign of the advent of a new emperor. But did the wise men really saw a comet?

Many astronomers have devoted time and energy to check if two thousand years ago, there appeared in the heavens a very bright star in concurrency with the birth of Jesus. They found that in 12-11 B.C. the comet Halley's passed. Then in the year A.D. 7, three times the conjunction of Jupiter (the star of kingship) with Saturn (the star of the Jews—according to Tacitus) was verified.

They were admirable for their efforts. However, carried out in this way, the search of the comet of Bethlehem reminds me of the expedition to Ararat to find the ark of Noah.

Reading the text of Matthew astronomers should easily realize that the evangelist does not allude to an astronomical phenomenon. The wise men saw the star that precedes them while they are going from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, then a star... from north to south. Really strange! All the celestial bodies move from east to west.

The star referred to by Matthew is not to be found in heaven but in the Bible. The evangelist writes for readers who are familiar with the Old Testament for centuries and are waiting to see the appearance of a star mentioned in a mysterious prophecy in the book of Numbers.

In Numbers 22–24 there was a curious story of Balaam and his talking donkey. Balaam was a soothsayer, a magus of the East, just like the ones mentioned in the Gospel today. One day he unwittingly makes a prophecy: “I see it but it is not an event that will happen shortly; I behold him but not near. A star shall come forth from Jacob, a king, born of Israel, rises... One of Jacob will dominate over his enemies” (Num 24:17-19).

So Balaam, “the man of penetrating eye” (Num 24:3) spoke, about 1200 years before the birth of Jesus. Since then, the Israelites began to anxiously wait for the rising of this star that was none other than the Messiah himself. Presenting to us the wise men of the East who see the star, the evangelist wants to tell his readers: from the descendant of Jacob the expected deliverer rose. It is Jesus. He is the star.

Should we then remove the comet from our cribs? No! Let us contemplate the star and point it also to our children, but we must explain to them that the star is not a star in the sky, but it is Jesus. He is the light that enlightens every person (Jn 1:9). He is the brilliant morning star (Rev 22:16).

Matthew writes in the A.D. 80s and what does he verify? He notes that the heathens entered en masse in the church. They recognized and adored the star, while the Jews, who were waiting for so many centuries, refused him. The story of the magi is, therefore, a “parable” of what was happening in the Christian community at the end of the first century. The pagans who sought the truth with honesty and perseverance have received from God the light to find it.

Matthew highlights another particular: the magi (the symbol of the pagan peoples) would never have come to Christ if the Jews, with their Scripture, had not shown them the way. Israel may not have followed the star but accomplished her mission. She was the mediator of salvation for all peoples.

Now we try to connect today’s gospel with the first reading. The prophet said that when in Jerusalem the light of the Lord shine, all nations would be on their way to the holy city, bringing their gifts. With the story of the magi, Matthew is telling us that this prophecy is fulfilled: guided by the light of the Messiah, the Gentiles (represented by the magi) make their way to Jerusalem, to bring gold, frankincense and myrrh. The popular piety applied to each of these gifts a symbolic meaning: gold indicates the recognition of Jesus as king, incense represents the adoration in front of his divinity, myrrh recalls his humanity—this fragrant resin will be remembered during the passion (Mk 15:23; Jn 19:39).

Even the story of the mounts was not invented for nothing. It is still the first reading today that speaks to us of “a troop of camels and dromedaries” that come from the East (Is 60:6). Unlike the shepherds who contemplated and rejoiced in front of the salvation that the Lord had revealed to them, the magi prostrated themselves in worship (v. 11). Their gesture recalls the court’s ceremony—the prostration and kissing of the feet of the king—or kissing the ground before the image of the deity. The pagans have therefore recognized as their king and their God, the child of Bethlehem and offered him their gifts.

They have become the symbol of people around the world who are led by the light of Christ. They are the image of the church, made up of people of every race, tribe, language and nation. Entering the church does not mean giving up one’s identity. It does not mean submitting to an unjust and false uniformity. Every person and every people maintain their cultural characteristics. With these, they enrich the universal church. Nobody is so rich as not to need anything and not so poor as not having anything to offer.

There is a video available by Fr. Fernando Armellini with commentary for today’s Gospel:
<http://www.bibleclaret.org/videos>

- See more at: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.nwxDmYzy.dpuf>