

EPIPHANY

Matthew's story of the wise men from the east is a richly layered text. It focuses on three nameless strangers from the east and Herod the king. The visitors are called magoi. The word has different uses. In most early Christian literature it means magician. Most scholars understand it to mean astrologers. Matthew reports that the Magi presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The number of gifts suggested that there were three visitors, although the text does not state this. There was more likely to have been a whole camel train - in Eastern Christian tradition, there were 12.

I wonder what the wise men were thinking on the journey home? I wonder if they had any idea of the horrors they had set in motion? Or were they in blissful ignorance, basking in a sense of spiritual enlightenment and imagining the great things that might now be possible in the world? Perhaps all they could do on the journey home, and forever afterwards, was to adore the holy child they had seen.

The Adoration of the Magi was a popular subject in Renaissance art, because it gave patrons and artists an opportunity to embellish paintings with the intricate detail of fine fabrics and jewels. The 3 exotic strangers always look out of place as they gather around the baby manger in the manger. But it is their gaze we are invited to follow, as they adore the Christ child.

We use the word *adore* today to express feelings for fluffy kittens or chocolate or beautiful young women in perfume ads. It's not a word we are accustomed to use in relation to God. Adoration comes from the Latin word to speak to, to address. By early medieval times it had come to mean an act of mind and will that acknowledges the infinite perfection of God, to regard with the utmost reverence and affection. Outward gestures express this act - bowing, genuflecting.

We use the word *adore* today in hymns and carols, but do we really hear the words we sing. The chorus to O come all ye faithful - O come let us adore him, sung 3 times, has sadly become the most tedious of all well-known Christmas carols - when you sing all 8 eight verses that's O come let us adore him, sung 24 times.

So how do we follow the gaze of the strangers at the manger?

The Journey of the Magi is a journey to the heart of God. And for all the travelling they did, the eyes of their souls, were forever fixed on what they had seen lying in the manger. And they carried home the treasure they had received, which they held with the utmost reverence and affection. Like Mary, as Luke's gospel tells, after the visitation of the shepherds, pondering what she had seen and treasuring it all in her heart.

The spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello says: Each of us carries in our heart an album of lovely pictures of the past. Memories of events that brought gladness to us. We each carry around an immense treasury into which we can dip into at any time to bring new joy and renewed energy to our living. He imagines this is what Mary did when she carefully placed away within her heart precious memories to which she would lovingly return later. When we fantasize about events and scenes that have actually taken place - rather than imaginary events in some unformed future - it has the same effect (pleasurable or painful) that reality itself has.

Think for a few moments about 3 gifts you treasure - they could be objects, or people, skills, experiences...and imagine bringing these gifts to God... to God in the form of an all-knowing newborn baby...you may wish to try this exercise at home sometime...

So as we reflect on the Adoration of the Magi on this great Feast of the Epiphany - let us treasure the gifts and revelations God brings to each one of us and come, let us adore him ... 24 x 24 times...

Let us pray...

O god the source of all insight,
Whose coming was revealed to the nations
Not among men of power
But on a woman's lap:
Give us grace
To seek you
Where you may be found,
That the wisdom of this world may be humbled
And discover your unexpected joy,
Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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