**Thursday 6th January 2022**

**EPIPHANY OF THE LORD**

The word Epiphany is the Greek for ‘to reveal’ or ‘to make known’ or ‘to uncover’ and it covers all sorts of situations. Christ was first made known to the Jews (Shepherds) and secondly the Gentiles (Magi} He was revealed in his Baptism and the Signs especially the first at the Wedding reception at Cana. All these have traditionally been associated with the Epiphany.

**First Reading Isaiah 60;1-6**

The background to this reading is the period of restoration after the first modest return from exile in Babylon soon after 538 B.C. Many exiles chose to remain in Babylon, having married local people and established livings there. This became the start of the Jewish Diaspora. The prophets, meanwhile encouraged some to return to Jerusalem with promises which outran reality.

It was an anti-climax when the returned exiles first reached the rubble of their city. Second-Isaiah's message is one of hope and confidence in these difficult times; he sees in vision the new, restored Jerusalem shining like a beacon with the glory of the Lord summoning all people to come and worship the true God.

It owes its place in the readings for the feast of the Epiphany to the mention of the approach of the southern pagan neighbours from Midian, Ephah (N. Arabia) and Sheba (S. Arabia or Sudan). They were descendants of Abraham (Gen 25:1-4) now coming into their heritage. The gifts of gold and incense are signs of wealth and worship and singing the praises of the Lord. Matthew pointedly adds the gift of myrrh for burial.

The opening verses of the reading sound the keynote of joy and give the passage a universal bearing with the recurring reference to peoples and nations. Jerusalem when restored will be the centre of a new and greater Israel — the Church.

The theme of light, so prominent here, will be taken up in the New Testament, e.g. 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 2:31). The contrast between light and darkness also anticipates John's Prologue. In sum the message is: the light of deliverance has dawned for Israel, and all nations will benefit by its radiance.

The exiles—now a great host, unlike the first pathetic group — are pictured as gathering for return to Jerusalem, bringing with them the wealth of the nations as if captivity has been reversed. The nations themselves will come from afar to pay tribute and to worship the Lord who has made his home in Jerusalem.

Though addressed to Jerusalem or to Israel as God's chosen people now restored to their rightful place, the prophecy will be fulfilled in Christ ('the light of the world') and in the new Israel, the Church.

**Second Reading Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 3:2-3.5-6**

This reading effectively expresses the theological significance of the feast of Epiphany: the fact that God invites all, Jew and Gentile, to share on an equal footing in the new kingdom of his Son.

This is the mystery: God's plan of salvation, hidden in the past, now revealed in Christ. It is difficult for us to share the sense of shocked bewilderment that Jews felt at the fact that pagans were to be accepted on equal terms with themselves; this is an aspect of the mystery that is particularly stressed in the passage. The emphasis is on the perfect equality of all men and women and from all nationalities: in Christ all are part of the one body (the meaning of 'in Christ Jesus').

One can observe a definite shift with regard to Old Testament passages (like that of the First Reading) even when these, too, stress the universality of the new reign which would be established in Israel. The experience of the Exile was to awaken in Jews the universal compassion that Yahweh had for humanity. The Magi of today's gospel are the first fruits of the Gentile world coming to receive their share in God's messianic blessings.

**Gospel Matthew 2:1-12**

In this narrative Matthew has cast back into the infancy of Jesus the reactions that, historically, greeted the proclamation of the risen Lord: some believed and paid homage; others rejected both the message and the preachers.

The Resurrection appearances provoked the twofold reaction of acceptance-homage and rejection-persecution. But this had been a running theme throughout the public ministry of Jesus. The same pattern is here presented in the infancy narrative. The negative reaction (of Herod and his advisers, the chief priests and scribes) turns the infancy narrative into a veritable gospel - for the gospel must have suffering and rejection as well as success.

The names, nationalities and even how many Magi come hundreds of years after Matthew, who was simply showing that Gentile wisdom recognised Jesus’ divinity when from the beginning, his own people sought his death. I once witnessed a school Nativity play that had three Wise Men, three Kings and three Magi, but still only three gifts.

There is little point in looking for the homeland of the Magi - whom Matthew seemingly would regard as astrologers of some sort. Nor is there any point in looking to a comet, a supernova, or a planetary conjunction to account for 'his star' (2:2). A star which rises, leads and comes to rest over one particular house is no natural phenomenon but it may have had one. Looking back over sixty-five years, Matthew may well be alluding to the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C.

Some have identified the appearance of Halley’s comet in the year 12 BC as the Star of Bethlehem, or a comet that appeared in the year 5 BC, noted by Chinese observers.

The fact is that there are many recorded instances of planetary conjunctions and comets that appeared between the year 12 BC and the conventionally accepted date of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Alternatively, the story may have been suggested by Balaam's mysterious oracle, 'a star will arise from Jacob, and a man will stand forth from Israel' (Numbers 24:17).

More to the point is the fact that, for Matthew, the Magi represent the Gentiles, fittingly alerted not by an angel (as Luke's Jewish shepherds) but by a star.

The liturgical tradition of our feast of Epiphany has caught Matthew's intent. Note how all the details (the strange visitors from the east, the mysterious star, the gifts) lead up to the final gesture of homage and worship. The adoration of the child Jesus by the Magi fulfils Isaiah's prophecy (First Reading) of the homage to be paid by the nations to the true Israel in the person of the Messiah.

The adoration of the Magi has stirred the imagination of artists and poets down the centuries. There is a large element of mystery about these visitors from the east. Who were they? Where did they come from? They vanish from the gospel as swiftly as they appear.

Matthew wants us to see the contrast between the faith of these pagan visitors and the unbelief of the Jewish leaders: the pagans have answered the call to faith in Christ while the chosen people have for the most part rejected it. Orthodox Jewish scholars looked down on pagan learning but Matthew is saying that in every people there are people of good will, open to God, ready to hear and follow the call of God. They are people prepared to follow their own lights wherever it might lead. Open and starry-eyed, they are naive, guileless, easily taken-in by self-serving priests and a murderous king. They are romantic and lovable figures.

The Old Testament, and popular tradition based on it, form the basis of Matthew's magi story; its purpose is firmly Christological. One may, however, find other interest in the characters of the story: in this respect the Magi. They are Gentiles, illustrating the universal breadth of the good news brought by the 'king of the Jews'.