

SOLEMNITY

Epiphany, in search of the Saviour like the Magi

ECCLESIA

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XVI**



Below is the full homily delivered by Benedict XVI on 6 January 2011, for the Holy Mass on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the Solemnity of Epiphany the Church continues to contemplate and to celebrate the

mystery of the birth of Jesus the Saviour. In particular, this day stresses the universal destination and significance of this birth.

By becoming man in Mary's womb, the Son of God did not only come for the People of Israel, represented by the Shepherds of Bethlehem, but also for the whole of humanity, represented by the Magi. And it is precisely on the Magi and their journey in search of the Messiah (*cf.* Mt 2:1-12) that the Church invites us to meditate and pray today.

We heard in the Gospel that having arrived in Jerusalem from the East they asked: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him" (v. 2). What kind of people were they and what kind of star was it? They were probably sages who scrutinized the heavens, but not in order to try to "read" the future in the stars, possibly to profit by so doing. Rather, they were men "in search" of something more, in search of the true light that could point out the path to take in life. They were people certain that something we might describe as the "signature" of God exists in creation, a signature that man can and must endeavour to discover and decipher.

Perhaps the way to become better acquainted with these Magi and to understand their desire to let themselves be guided by God's signs is to pause to consider what they find on their journey, in the great city of Jerusalem.

First of all they met King Herod. He was certainly interested in the Child of which the Magi spoke; not in order to worship him, as he wished to make them believe by lying, but rather to kill him. Herod was a powerful man who saw others solely as rivals to combat. Basically, on reflection, God also seemed a rival to him, a particularly dangerous rival who would like to deprive men of their vital space, their autonomy, their power; a rival who points out the way to take in life and thus prevents one from doing what one likes.

Herod listened to the interpretations of the Prophet Micah's words, made by his experts in Sacred Scripture, but his only thought was of the throne. So God himself had to be clouded over and people had to be reduced to mere pawns to move on the great chessboard of power. Herod is a figure we dislike, whom we instinctively judge negatively because of his brutality.

Yet we should ask ourselves: is there perhaps something of Herod also in us? Might we too sometimes see God as a sort of rival? Might we too be blind to his signs and deaf to his words because we think he is setting limits on our life and does not allow us to dispose of our existence as we please?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, when we see God in this way we end by feeling dissatisfied and discontent because we are not letting ourselves be guided by the One who is the foundation of all things.

We must rid our minds and hearts of the idea of rivalry, of the idea that making room for God is a constraint on us. We must open ourselves to the certainty that God is almighty love that takes nothing away, that does not threaten; on the contrary he is the Only One who can give us the possibility of living to the full, of experiencing true joy.

The Magi then meet the scholars, the theologians, the experts who know everything about the Sacred Scriptures, who are familiar with the possible interpretations, who can quote every passage of it since they know it by heart and are therefore of valuable assistance to those who choose to walk on God's path.

However, St Augustine says, they like being guides to others, they point out the way; but they themselves do not travel, they stand stock-still. For them the Scriptures become a sort of atlas to be perused with curiosity, a collection of words and concepts for study and for learned discussion.

However, once again we can ask ourselves: is not there a temptation within us to consider the Sacred Scriptures, this very rich and vital treasure for the faith of the Church, as an object of study and of specialists' discussions rather than as the Book that shows us the way to attain life? I think, as I suggested in the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, that profound willingness must ceaselessly be born within them to see the words of the Bible interpreted in the Church's living Tradition (n. 18), as the truth that tells us what man is and how he can fulfil himself totally, the truth that is the way to take every day, with others, if we wish to build our lives on rock and not on sand.

And so we come to the star. What kind of star was the star the Magi saw and

followed? This question has been the subject of discussion among astronomers down the centuries. Kepler, for example, claimed that it was “new” or “super-new”, one of those stars that usually radiates a weak light but can suddenly and violently explode, producing an exceptionally bright blaze.

These are of course interesting things but do not guide us to what is essential for understanding that star. We must return to the fact that those men were seeking traces of God; they were seeking to read his “signature” in creation; they knew that “the heavens are telling of the glory of God” (Psalm 19 [18]:2); they were certain, that is, that God can be perceived in creation.

But, as sages, the Magi also knew that it is not with any kind of telescope but rather with the profound eyes of reason in search of the ultimate meaning of reality and with the desire for God, motivated by faith, that it is possible to meet him, indeed, becomes possible for God to come close to us.

The universe is not the result of chance, as some would like to make us believe. In contemplating it, we are asked to interpret in it something profound; the wisdom of the Creator, the inexhaustible creativity of God, his infinite love for us.

We must not let our minds be limited by theories that always go only so far and that — at a close look — are far from competing with faith but do not succeed in explaining the ultimate meaning of reality. We cannot but perceive in the beauty of the world, its mystery, its greatness and its rationality, the eternal rationality; nor can we dispense with its guidance to the one God, Creator of Heaven and of earth.

If we acquire this perception we shall see that the One who created the world and the One who was born in a grotto in Bethlehem and who continues to dwell among us in the Eucharist, are the same living God who calls us, who loves us and who wants to lead us to eternal life.

Herod, the Scriptural exegetes, the star: but let us follow the journey of the Magi to Jerusalem. Above the great city the star disappears, it is no longer seen. What does this mean? In this case too, we must interpret the sign in its depth. For those men it was logical to seek the new king in the royal palace, where the wise court advisors were to be found.

Yet, probably to their amazement, they were obliged to note that this newborn Child was not found in the places of power and culture, even though in those places they were offered precious information about him.

On the other hand they realized that power, even the power of knowledge, sometimes blocks the way to the encounter with this Child. The star then guided them to

Bethlehem, a little town; it led them among the poor and the humble to find the King of the world.

God's criteria differ from human criteria. God does not manifest himself in the power of this world but in the humility of his love, the love that asks our freedom to be welcomed in order to transform us and to enable us to reach the One who is Love. Yet, for us too things are not so different from what they were for the Magi. If we were to be asked our opinion on how God was to save the world, we might answer that he would have to manifest all his power to give the world a fairer economic system in which each person could have everything he wanted. Indeed, this would be a sort of violence to man because it would deprive him of the fundamental elements that characterize him. In fact neither our freedom nor our love would be called into question. God's power is revealed in quite a different way: in Bethlehem, where we encounter the apparent powerlessness of his love. And it is there that we must go and there that we find God's star.

Thus, a final important element of the event of the Magi appears to us very clearly: the language of creation enables us to make good headway on the path towards God but does not give us the definitive light. In the end, it was indispensable for the Magi to listen to the voice of the Sacred Scriptures: they alone could show them the way. The true star is the word of God which, amidst of the uncertainty of human discourses, gives us the immense splendour of the Divine Truth.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us allow ourselves to be guided by the star that is the word of God, let us follow it in our lives, walking with the Church in which the Word has pitched his tent. Our road will always be illumined by a light that no other sign can give us. And we too shall become stars for others, a reflection of that light which Christ caused to shine upon us. Amen.