

Epiphany of the Lord

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Long ago we learned the carol, "We Three Kings." They were also called "Magi," a word we did not know but which vaguely suggested magicians. The scripture calls them "wise men," and we are somewhat jolted when some translations turn this into "astrologers."

Who are they, anyway? Even their names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, were made up in the Middle Ages. They are the seekers. They are indeed wise men, for they seek God. They are really us, for we all seek God by many names all through our lives. We seek for love and acceptance, for long life and happiness; we even seek for wholeness, the original word for holiness. And all these are found ultimately and completely in God. This led Leo Tolstoy to say, "God is the name of my desire"

and St Augustine to write his famous words, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

Consider the Wise Men. They come from an unknown country. So do we. Most of us could not even name our great-grandparents, or go back more than a hundred years in our personal biographies. We the human race and our first origin is an unknown country that some call heaven, others the Creator, and some, the mind of God. IF

the universe and eventually life began with a cosmic explosion, we think it is not an accident that out of this chaos across fifteen billion years has come a rose garden, a wheatfield, and you and me.

We come from "an unknown country," and we are trying to find our way back. It is not the Garden of Eden, it is all that Eden stands for; our homeland, our heartland, is the original and abiding goodness for which our code word is God. Almighty, everlasting God.

St. Paul speaks of God in his goodness, and declares that he has unfolded his secret plan. He meant the discovery that God's salvation included the Gentiles. The three kings to whom Jesus revealed himself represented a mighty throng of people. The chosen race now becomes the human race which is chosen -- chosen to be "co-heirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the gospel." But the real secret is that God *is* goodness. And when we have found the good man and the good woman, we have encountered the presence of God. This is so simple that we often do not take it in, or dare to believe it. But Jesus himself, when a bystander praised him, answered, "Why do you call me good? One alone is good, my Father in heaven." It is because God shares his Spirit with us that we are empowered to be good, to be transparent with divine life. This does not excuse us from using our freedom. His indwelling Spirit is an invitation at the very core of our being to reject evil and to choose the good. Call it grace, call it

conscience; it is the gift of God, the presence of God.

We are right, however, not to be satisfied with "finding God in people." Even if we realize that it is the divine power and the Spirit, what is found might be more accurately called "the trace of God." He is greater than our experience, greater than our heroes. They are like the star that led those other seekers, stars in the night that lead us on. We read biographies and tell the story of saints to be inspired. But we need to meet people in the flesh who remind us once again that the Word was made flesh. We need to be this kind of people! Stars in the night, signs of God to each other.

The story of the Wise Men can help us in another way. If we read and hear it closely, we should note that they are aided in their search by the scriptures. The chief priests and scribes at Herod's court searched out the scriptures and interpreted the messianic prophecies. It is ironic that they themselves do not discover the messiah; the strangers continue their journey to Bethlehem alone. But after them, ever afterwards, what a great throng has followed after, seeking the Prince of Peace, Mary's son, journeying to the House of Bread! Well did the prophet Isaiah foretell of Christ: "Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance . . . Your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses."

We are the seekers. As flowers turn to the sun, as water seeks to flow into the sea, so we seek the Living One, to return to the unknown country whence we came. And the Word of God, as well as the Church which proclaims that word, is a very precious and important guide in our journey.

Let us not grow weary in our search for God. The Wise Men had a star. We have the church, the sacraments, the word -- and over six billion people. There is a gloomy side to it. Isaiah is right when he says that "darkness covers the earth and thick clouds cover the people" -- this is often our story, as sin and ignorance obscure the divine presence. But we have our saints and heroes, sung and unsung. And the quiet goodness or heroic sanctity we encounter is a sign that God lives. It is an invitation to believe in him, to come with our gifts and proclaim his praises. We may be poor, like the shepherds, or somewhere on the social scale between shepherd and king. Some of us come from the east, and some from Seattle! No matter, we are welcome. We are the seekers, and Christ is the way for which we are searching: the way back to the house of our Father.