



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica
Sunday, 6 January 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we are celebrating Christ, Light of the world, and his manifestation to the peoples. On Christmas Day the message of the liturgy rings out in these words: "*Hodie descendit lux magna super terram* - Today, a great light descends upon earth" (*Roman Missal*). In Bethlehem this "great light" appeared to a handful of people, a tiny "remnant of Israel": the Virgin Mary, her husband Joseph and a few shepherds. It was a humble light, as is the style of the true God; a little flame kindled in the night: a fragile newborn infant wailing in the silence of the world... but this hidden, unknown birth was accompanied by the hymns of praise of the heavenly hosts singing of glory and peace (cf. Lk 2: 13-14).

So it was that although the appearance of this light on earth was modest, it was powerfully projected in the heavens: the birth of the King of the Jews had been announced by the rising of a star, visible from afar. This was attested to by some "wise men" who had come to Jerusalem from the East shortly after Jesus' birth, in the time of King Herod (cf. Mt 2: 1-2). Once again heaven and earth, the cosmos and history, call to each other and respond. The ancient prophecies find confirmation in the language of the stars. "A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Nm 24: 17), announced Balaam, the pagan seer, when he was summoned to curse the People of Israel, whom he instead blessed because, as God had revealed to him, "they are blessed" (Nm 22: 12). In his Commentary on Matthew's Gospel, Cromatius of Aquileia establishes a connection between Balaam and the Magi: "He prophesied that Christ would come; they saw him with the eyes of faith". And he adds an important observation: "The star was seen by

everyone but not everyone understood its meaning. Likewise, our Lord and Saviour was born for everyone, but not everyone has welcomed him" (4: 1-2). Here, the meaning of the symbol of light applied to Christ's birth appears: it expresses God's special blessing on Abraham's descendents, destined to be extended to all the peoples of the earth.

The Gospel event which we commemorate on the Epiphany - the Magi's visit to the Child Jesus in Bethlehem - thus refers us back to the origins of the history of God's People, that is, to Abraham's call. We are in chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis. The first 11 chapters are like great frescos that answer some of humanity's fundamental questions: what is the origin of the universe and of the human race? Where does evil come from? Why are there different languages and civilizations? Among the narratives with which the Bible begins, there appears a first "covenant" which God made with Noah after the flood. It was a universal covenant concerning the whole of humanity: the new pact with Noah's family is at the same time a pact with "all flesh". Then, before Abraham's call, there is another great fresco which is very important for understanding the meaning of Epiphany: that of the Tower of Babel. The sacred text says that in the beginning, "the whole earth had one language and few words" (Gn 11: 1). Then men said: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gn 11: 4). The consequence of this sin of pride, similar to that of Adam and Eve, was the confusion of languages and the dispersion of humanity over all the earth (cf. Gn 11: 7-8). This means "Babel" and was a sort of curse, similar to being banished from the earthly paradise.

At this point, with Abraham's call, the story of the blessing begins: it is the beginning of God's great plan to make humanity one family through the covenant with a new people, chosen by him to be a blessing among all the peoples (cf. Gn 12: 1-3). This divine plan is still being implemented; it culminated in the mystery of Christ. It was then that the "last times" began, in the sense that the plan was fully revealed and brought about in Christ but needs to be accepted by human history, which always remains a history of fidelity on God's part, but unfortunately also of infidelity on the part of us human beings. The Church herself, the depository of the blessing, is holy and made up of sinners, marked by tension between the "already" and the "not yet". In the fullness of time Jesus Christ came to bring the covenant to completion: he himself, true God and true man, is the Sacrament of God's fidelity to his plan of salvation for all humanity, for all of us.

The arrival in Bethlehem of the Magi from the East to adore the newborn Messiah is a sign of the manifestation of the universal King to the peoples and to all who seek the truth. It is the beginning of a movement opposed to that of Babel: from confusion to comprehension, from dispersion to reconciliation. Thus, we discern a link between Epiphany and Pentecost: if the Nativity of Christ, who is the Head, is also the Nativity of the Church, his Body, we can see the Magi as the peoples who join the remnant of Israel, foretelling the great sign of the "polyglot Church" that the Holy Spirit carried out 50 days after Easter. The faithful and tenacious love of God which is never lacking in his covenant from generation to generation is the "mystery" of which St Paul speaks in his Letters

and in the passage from the Letter to the Ephesians which has just been proclaimed: the Apostle says that this mystery "was made known to me by revelation" (Eph 3: 3).

This "mystery" of God's fidelity constitutes the hope of history. It is of course opposed by the impulses of division and tyranny that wound humanity due to sin and conflicts of selfishness. The Church in history is at the service of this "mystery" of blessing for all humanity. The Church fully carries out her mission in this mystery of God's fidelity only when she reflects the light of Christ the Lord within herself and so helps the peoples of the world on their way to peace and authentic progress. Indeed, God's Word revealed through the Prophet Isaiah still continues to apply: "darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you" (Is 60: 2). What the prophet proclaimed in Jerusalem was to be fulfilled in Christ's Church: "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Is 60: 3).

With Jesus Christ, Abraham's blessing was extended to all peoples, to the universal Church as the new Israel which welcomes within her the whole of humanity. Yet, what the prophet said is also true today in many senses: "thick darkness [covers] the peoples" and our history. Indeed, it cannot be said that "globalization" is synonymous with "world order" - it is quite the opposite. Conflicts for economic supremacy and hoarding resources of energy, water and raw materials hinder the work of all who are striving at every level to build a just and supportive world. There is a need for greater hope, which will make it possible to prefer the common good of all to the luxury of the few and the poverty of the many. "This great hope can only be God... not any god, but the God who has a human face" (*Spe Salvi*, n. 31): the God who showed himself in the Child of Bethlehem and the Crucified and Risen One. If there is great hope, it is possible to persevere in sobriety. If true hope is lacking, happiness is sought in drunkenness, in the superfluous, in excesses, and we ruin ourselves and the world. It is then that moderation is not only an ascetic rule but also a path of salvation for humanity. It is already obvious that only by adopting a sober lifestyle, accompanied by a serious effort for a fair distribution of riches, will it be possible to establish an order of just and sustainable development. For this reason we need people who nourish great hope and thus have great courage: the courage of the Magi, who made a long journey following a star and were able to kneel before a Child and offer him their precious gifts. We all need this courage, anchored to firm hope. May Mary obtain it for us, accompanying us on our earthly pilgrimage with her maternal protection. Amen!