



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Wednesday, 6 January 2010

(Video)

Images of the celebration

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, the Solemnity of the Epiphany, the great light that radiates from the Cave of Bethlehem inundates all of mankind through the Magi from the East. The first Reading, taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah; and the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, which we just heard, juxtapose the promise and its fulfilment in that particular tension noted when reading passages from the Old and New Testaments in succession. Following the humiliations undergone by the people of Israel at the hands of worldly powers, the splendid vision of the Prophet Isaiah appears before us. He sees the moment when the great light of God that seems powerless and incapable of protecting his people will rise to shine on all the earth so that the kings of nations bow before him, coming from the ends of the earth to deposit their most precious treasures at his feet. And the heart of the people will tremble with joy.

Compared to this vision, the one the Evangelist Matthew presents to us appears poor and humble: it seems impossible for us to recognize in it the fulfilment of the Prophet Isaiah's words. In fact, those who arrived in Bethlehem were not the powerful and the kings of the earth, but the Magi, unknown men, perhaps regarded with suspicion, and in any case, not deemed worthy of special attention. The inhabitants of Jerusalem learned of the event but did not think it worth bothering about. Not even in Bethlehem did anyone seem to take any notice of the birth of this Baby, called King of the Jews by the Magi, nor about these men who had come from the East to visit him. Soon

after, in fact, when Herod made it clear that he was effectively the one in power forcing the Holy Family to flee to Egypt and offering proof of his cruelty by the massacre of the innocents (cf. Mt 2: 13-18) the episode of the Magi seemed to have been disregarded and forgotten. It is therefore understandable that the hearts and souls of believers throughout the centuries have been attracted more by the vision of the Prophet than by the sober narration of the evangelist, as the Nativity scenes also show where there are camels, dromedaries and powerful kings of the world kneeling before the Child, laying down their gifts to him in precious caskets. But we must pay more attention to what the two texts communicate to us.

In fact, what did Isaiah see with his prophetic vision? In one single moment, he glimpsed a reality that was destined to mark all history. But even the event that Matthew narrates is not a brief and negligible episode that closes with the Magi hastening back to their own lands. On the contrary, it is the beginning. Those figures who came from the East were not the last but the first of a great procession of those who, throughout the epochs of history, are able to recognize the message of the Star, who know how to walk on the paths indicated by Sacred Scripture. Thus they also know how to find the One who seems weak and fragile but instead has the power to grant the greatest and most profound joy to the heart of man. In him, indeed, is made manifest the stupendous reality that God knows us and is close to us, that his greatness and power are not expressed according to the world's logic, but to the logic of a helpless baby whose strength is only that of the love which he entrusts to us. In the journey of history, there are always people who are enlightened by the light of the Star, who find the way and reach him. They all live, each in his or her own way, the experience of the Magi.

They had brought gold, incense and myrrh. These are certainly not gifts that correspond to basic, daily needs. At that moment, the Holy Family was far more in need of something different from incense or myrrh, and not even the gold could have been of immediate use to them. But these gifts have a profound significance: they are an act of justice. In fact, according to the mentality prevailing then in the Orient, they represent the recognition of a person as God and King, that is, an act of submission. They were meant to say that from that moment, the donors belonged to the sovereign and they recognize his authority. The consequence is immediate. The Magi could no longer follow the road they came on, they could no longer return to Herod, they could no longer be allied with that powerful and cruel sovereign. They had always been led along the path of the Child, making them ignore the great and the powerful of the world, and taking them to him who awaits us among the poor, the road of love which alone can transform the world.

Therefore, not only did the Magi set out on their journey, but their deed started something new they traced a new road, and a new light has come down on earth which has never faded. The Prophet's vision is fulfilled: that light could no longer be ignored by the world. People would go towards that Child and would be illumined by that joy that only he can give. The light of Bethlehem continues to shine throughout the world. To those who have welcomed this light, St Augustine said: "Even we, recognizing Christ our King and Priest who died for us, have honoured him as if

we had offered him gold, incense and myrrh. But what remains is for us to bear witness to him by taking a different road from that on which we came" (*Sermo 202. In Epiphania Domini, 3,4*).

Thus if we read together the promise of the Prophet Isaiah and its fulfilment in the Gospel of Matthew in the great context of all history, it is evident that what we have been told which we seek to reproduce in our Nativity scenes is neither a dream nor a vain play on sensations and emotions, devoid of vigour and reality, but is the Truth that irradiates in the world, although Herod always seems stronger, and that Infant seems to be found among people of no importance or who are even downtrodden. But in that Baby is expressed the power of God, who brings together all people through the ages, because under his lordship, they may follow the course of love which transfigures the world. Nevertheless, even if the few in Bethlehem have become many, believers in Jesus Christ always seem to be few. Many have seen the star, but only a few have understood its message. Scripture scholars in the time of Jesus knew the word of God perfectly well. They were able to say without hesitation what could be found in Scripture about the place where the Messiah would be born, but as St Augustine said: "They were like milestones along the road though they could give information to travellers along the way, they remained inert and immobile" (*Sermo 199. In Epiphania Domini, 1,2*).

Therefore, we can ask ourselves: what is the reason why some men see and find, while others do not? What opens the eyes and the heart? What is lacking in those who remain indifferent, in those who point out the road but do not move? We can answer: too much self-assurance, the claim to knowing reality, the presumption of having formulated a definitive judgment on everything closes them and makes their hearts insensitive to the newness of God. They are certain of the idea that they have formed of the world and no longer let themselves be involved in the intimacy of an adventure with a God who wants to meet them. They place their confidence in themselves rather than in him, and they do not think it possible that God could be so great as to make himself small so as to come really close to us.

Lastly, what they lack is authentic humility, which is able to submit to what is greater, but also authentic courage, which leads to belief in what is truly great even if it is manifested in a helpless Baby. They lack the evangelical capacity to be children at heart, to feel wonder, and to emerge from themselves in order to follow the path indicated by the star, the path of God. God has the power to open our eyes and to save us. Let us therefore ask him to give us a heart that is wise and innocent, that allows us to see the Star of his mercy, to proceed along his way, in order to find him and be flooded with the great light and true joy that he brought to this world. Amen.

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