



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Commemoration of the Feast of the Epiphany *being the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 8th, 2017*

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Today we are commemorating The Epiphany – a feast that marks Jesus’s revelation of himself to mankind in general and to the gentiles, in particular. As such, it is one of the most joyous liturgical seasons of the Christian year – a season that is initially marked by celebrating the visit of the three wise men to the Holy Family in Bethlehem.

What makes these three men unique is that they had had no divine revelation in the conventional sense of the word. Yet they recognized that tiny newborn baby as savior of mankind – something that many people who met the adult Jesus face-to-face failed to do or refused to acknowledge.

This raises a question that is particularly apt in this new age of apostasy: How can it be that some see the light, while others manage to miss it completely? It is a question asked of St. Paul by the newly converted Christians at Corinth. His response: “The god of this world [Satan] hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.”

Many folks today, doubtless, find the idea of personified evil unconvincing. In this age of incipient, albeit ill-informed atheism, many seem to assume science has proved there's no such thing as the supernatural, and, hence, God does not exist. Actually, current scientific knowledge points to quite the opposite conclusion.

John W. Montgomery, professor of law and theology at the International School of Law, Washington, D.C., explains that the possibility of

the resurrection has to be accepted by modern men. “Unlike people of the Newtonian epoch,” he writes, “The universe is no longer a tight, safe, predictable playing field in which we know all the rules. Since Einstein, no modern has had the right to rule out the possibility of events because of prior knowledge of ‘natural law.’ ”

In other words, people who imagine modern science denies the existence of God – or the devil, for that matter– do not do so on the basis of superior knowledge. They do so because they are simply misinformed.

There is nothing new about this phenomenon. No matter how graphically God manifests himself to mankind, some always refuse to believe. Others, however, have no problem seeing the hand of God in world affairs – the visit of the wise men to the manger in Bethlehem is a case in point.

St Matthew tells us that the three – among the most distinguished scientists in the ancient world – noted the sudden appearance of an extraordinarily bright star in the east and theorized it portended the birth of an unusually important leader. To test their hypothesis, they launched an expedition that ultimately took them to Judea.

Science appears to confirm the story. For example, Grant Mathews, professor of theoretical astrophysics and cosmology in the University of Notre Dame’s College of Science, among many others, has studied the historical, astronomical and biblical records to discover just what it was that impelled the wise men to set off on their journey.

The Christmas star was, he believes, not a comet, a nova or supernova. It is, he says, much more likely to have been an extremely rare planetary alignment that occurred in 6 B.C. The Sun, Moon, Jupiter and Saturn were all in Aries, while Venus was next door in Pisces. Mercury and Mars were on the other side in Taurus. And, at the time, Aries was the location of the Vernal Equinox.

In those days, the NASA of the ancient world was located Mesopotamia and Persia. And astronomer/astrologers, like the three wise men, specialized in analyzing the shifting patterns of heavenly bodies, trying to divine their meaning. Professor Grant says the wise men spotted the star in the east because it would have appeared as a Morning Star.

They would, he says, have concluded that the presence of Jupiter and the Moon signaled the birth of a ruler with a special destiny. Saturn, moreover, symbolized the giving of life, as did the presence of Aries in the vernal equinox. And as Aries was also the constellation associated with Judea, it signified the newborn would be king of the Jews.

The wise men's discovery came at a time when everybody in Judea –throughout the whole Jewish Diaspora in fact – were awaiting the coming of God's long prophesied Messiah. But by no means everybody was looking forward to the event.

King Herod, for one, was less than enthusiastic about the prospect. Herod had spent his entire career ruthlessly annihilating rival claimants to his throne. The Messiah, however, was the rival to beat them all. If it's hard to fight city hall, it's impossible to fight God. But you've got to give Herod marks for trying.

Herod might have been a bloodthirsty tyrant, who murdered members of his own family with the same alacrity that he slaughtered his enemies, but he was also a man of exquisite taste and culture. And as a matter of political policy if not piety, he was a noted student of the Jewish scriptures.

Herod knew full well that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. But instead of directly giving the information to the wise men, he summoned his Council of State. Doubtless, he was playing for time while his agents checked out the wise men's story and to develop with a plan to deal with the threat.

The king's spies must have gone over Bethlehem with a fine-tooth comb. It is, however, highly unlikely they would have suspected a baby born in a stable to be the Messiah. No one imagined God would arrange for his Son to be born in anything other than the most noble of circumstances.

In any event, following the directions of Herod, a man they by no means trusted, the Wise men headed off for Bethlehem, a one-horse town in the boondocks, where they came face to face with an unremarkable married couple who had set up house with their new born son in a converted stable.

At this point, most scientists, ancient and modern, could be forgiven for throwing in the towel and heading for home to recheck their data. The remarkable thing about these three men is that they recognized the child of that unremarkable couple as the object of their quest. And they offered him the tokens of divine leadership they had brought with them – gold, frankincense and myrrh. And their remarkable response to the baby in the manger at Bethlehem should serve as a lesson for all of us here today.

The Wise Men, who made that long and dangerous journey to Bethlehem, were philosophers who knew nothing of quantum physics or thermonuclear dynamics. They didn't even understand the internal combustion engine. But they were wiser by far than those people today who reject the Gospel of Christ.

They understood how little they knew of the workings of the universe and they had the humility to let God lead them in search of the truth. This is the beginning of true wisdom. It is the point at which the Epiphany started almost 2,000 years ago. And it's the point at which it starts today.

Professor Grant, the wise men's 21st Century counterpart, calculates that another alignment like the Bethlehem Star will not be seen for more than 500,000 years. "At this time of year," he says, "I feel a kindred connection to the ancient Magi, who earnestly scanned the heavens for insight into the truth about the nature and evolution of the universe, just as we do today. In the end we must keep in mind, that the Magi were not really seeking star at all. They were seeking the light of the World. Even to this day that light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." *AMEN*