

## **THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY**

Is 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-2,7-8,10-13; Eph 3:2-3,5-6; Mt 2:1-12

### ***THE MAGI vs. THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND THE SCRIBES: TAKE SIDES! YOU CHOOSE!***

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun

Saturday, January 2, 2010, 8:00 p.m., Hilton Hotel

Sunday, January 3, 2010, St. Stephen's, 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

Our **life** is full of **comparisons**:

the **good guys** and the **bad guys**, **cops** and **robbers**,  
**buyers** and **sellers**, **north** and the **south**,  
**offense** and **defense**, **Vikings** and **Giants**.

There is a **major comparison** embedded into **today's gospel** for the Epiphany,  
except **most listeners** or **readers don't even realize** a **comparison** is being made.

The **comparison** is **subtle**.

It is very **carefully written**.

It is **full of irony**.

Actually, it is **dripping** with **sarcasm**.

If we are to **discover** the **comparison**,  
we have to get **underneath** the **text**,  
we have to get **behind** the **story**.

Let's begin with some very **important background information**.

Today's gospel is from **Matthew**, and Matthew was a **Jew**.

There is a strong consensus among biblical scholars  
that **Matthew's intended audience** was fellow **Jews**.

**Jews** were the only ones who **used** the **Old Testament extensively**,  
and **Matthew quotes** the **Old Testament** more than any other evangelist,  
and Matthew **argues** with all his might that **Jesus** is the **fulfillment** of the **Jewish scriptures**.

At the time **Matthew** wrote his **gospel** around **85 AD**,  
55 years after Jesus died, rose, and ascended,

**Matthew** was deeply **disappointed** by pervasive **Jewish obstinacy**,  
their strong **resistance** to **Jesus** and his **gospel**.

The **obstinacy** began **when Jesus** was **born**.

When **Jesus** was **born** and the star appeared,  
it was **not Jews** in Israel who noticed;  
it was **Gentiles** in a foreign country who **noticed**.

The **Magi** (also wise men or kings) lived in **Persia, modern-day Iraq**. They were **well-educated**, particularly in **medicine** and **history**, and they were **well-versed** in **astronomy**, the stars and the planets and the constellations, but they also **practiced astrology**, predictions and fortune telling, and the **Jews belittled** them and **despised** them.

When the **star appeared** after Jesus was born, the **Magi in Persia** were **watching** (Mt 2:2b), while the **chief priests** and the **scribes** in particular, and the **Jews in general**, were not (Mt 2:4).

**Matthew** is making an **intended comparison**.

The **Jews** in Israel, the ones who **should have been paying attention, were not!**

That's not all!

The **Magi followed** the **light** of the star.

The **light** is a **symbol**.

**God** is **light** (Ps 27:1; Is 60:19,20).

**Jesus** is the **Light** of the World (Jn 8:12; 12:46).

To **follow the light** is to **walk in God's ways**.

When the **Magi followed the light**, they didn't know exactly where it would take them, but they trusted it would take them to the right place, and the light **took them to Jesus**.

And here is **Matthew's implied comparison**:

the **Magi**, those "evil" **Gentile foreigners**, **followed the light**;

while the "holy" **Jews in Israel**, the **Promised Land**, did not notice the star, and they **failed to follow the light**.

Here is **Matthew's challenge** to us:

Are we going to be more **like the Magi** OR more **like the chief priests** and the scribes?

Have we **seen the light** OR have we **failed to notice**?

Are we **following the light to Jesus** OR are we **stuck** where we are?

There are **four major moves** in Matthew's **Magi account**.

Here's the **second major move**.

When the **Magi** arrived in Jerusalem, they didn't know precisely where to go, so they stopped and **asked for directions**.

The Old Testament **scriptures** were **consulted**, and the **prophets said** the **Messiah** would be born in "**Bethlehem** of Judea" (Mt 2:5,6). Matthew's point is that if we **pick up our Bibles**, the **scriptures will lead us to Jesus**.

And here is **Matthew's implied comparison**:

the **Magi** used the **scriptures** to **get to Jesus** (which is a good thing),  
while the **chief priests** and the **scribes**, the “Jews,”  
misused the scriptures to **give Herod information** he needed  
to **seek and destroy the child Jesus** (which is a bad thing) (Mt 2:5).

**Matthew** was **outraged** at all this.

And here is **Matthew's challenge** to us:

Are we going to be more like the **Magi** OR more like the **chief priests** and **scribes**?  
Are we going to pick up our **Bibles** and **read them** and **use** them in a **good way** OR not?

On we go to the **third major move**.

Once the **Magi** arrived at the place where Jesus was, the Magi **entered** the **house**,  
and once they came into **Jesus' presence**,

they **prostrated themselves** and did him homage (Mt 2:11a).

**How** the Magi did this, **we do not know**.

It might have been

a **profound bow**,

or they might have **knelt** down,

or they might have **laid on the floor**.

But whatever they did, they **showed Jesus tremendous reverence**.

And again, **Matthew** is **furious** about this.

And here is **Matthew's implied comparison**:

the **Magi**, those hated “evil” Gentile foreigners,

**showed Jesus** tremendous **respect** and **reverence**;

and the **local Jews**, “pious and holy,” showed him **no respect whatsoever**.

And here is **Matthew's challenge** to us:

Are we going to be **more like the Magi** OR more like the **chief priests** and the **scribes**?

It is **Matthew's hope** that we will **follow** the **good example** of the **Magi**

and always **show Jesus** the **utmost respect** and **reverence**,

by the way we **read** the **gospel**,

by the way we **bow** before receiving Holy **Communion**,

by the way we **genuflect** before the **Blessed Sacrament**,

and by the way we **respect Jesus** present in other people.

Let us now move to the **fourth** and **final major move**.

**After** the **Magi** offered their gesture of **reverence**,

they got up and **offered their treasures** of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Mt 2:11b).

These gifts were **really expensive**,

so valuable that they probably represented a **good portion** of their **life's savings**.

As we know from our Christmas **gift-giving**,

it's **not just** the **gift**, but the **intention behind** the **gift** – one's heart, one's love.

When it came to **Jesus**, the **Magi didn't hold back**.

They **gave**, and they gave **gladly**.

Again, **Matthew** is **very upset** with the Jewish leaders.

And here's **Matthew's implied comparison**:

the **Magi**, those supposedly superstitious Gentile foreigners,

**gave the best of what they had** to Jesus;

while the **chief priests** and the **scribes** did **not give a nickel** (a shekel),

**not to Jesus**,

and **not to the Temple** either

where they **took money rather than donate money**.

And here is **Matthew's challenge** to us:

Are we going to be **more like the Magi** OR more like the **chief priests** and the **scribes**?

Are we going to **give our best to Jesus**,

**quality time**, our **best effort**, and a **portion** of our **treasure** too,

OR, are we going to be **stingy** and **selfish** and **ignore Jesus** and **ignore his good work**?

**Matthew** is **hoping** that we will **follow the good example** of the **Magi** and be **truly generous**.

**Matthew** has **set up a major comparison** for us:

the **Magi** on the **one hand**,

the **chief priests** and the **elders** on the other.

We have to **make a choice**.

On this **great feast** of the **Epiphany**,

**Matthew** is **hoping** that we will **imitate the Magi**:

**see the star** and **follow the light**;

use the **scriptures** to **find** our way to **Jesus**;

offer Jesus our **profound respect** and **reverence**

wherever and whenever we encounter him;

and, that we **offer our treasures to God**

by **sharing generously** with our **neighbor**.