



Fact of Faith

Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

by Fr. Larry Rice

Advent is simply the Latin word for “coming.” If we can manage to meditate on any “coming” in December besides the comings and goings of Christmas shopping, it’s usually Christ’s coming to Mary in a stable.

On Sunday, January 7, 2018, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. In popular tradition, this day commemorates the arrival of the three kings at the stable in Bethlehem where Christ was born. The gospel reading for the day—Matthew 2:1-12—tells the story.

Over the years, a lot of tradition has grown around this story. Many people will tell you that the magi were three kings, named Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior, and they may note that Caspar is

traditionally depicted with darker skin. But if you read those twelve short verses from Matthew’s Gospel, it becomes clear that we really know very little about the magi. We don’t know their names. We don’t know where they came from—Matthew only says “from the east.” We don’t even know that they were kings. The word used by Matthew is “magi,” meaning someone learned in esoteric knowledge. Some translations call them “astrologers,” but the only basis for that is the statement that they were following a star.

And even the star itself is a mystery. Astronomers can chart the movement of the stars back in time, but they can’t seem to agree about the existence of an astronomical event that would explain the reference. And even the most casual observer would have a hard time explaining what it would mean for a star to move through the sky and then stop over a particular place.

Regardless of who the magi were and how the star showed them the way, the most significant part of this event is the identity of the one who is made know—Jesus, the newborn king, who is worthy of homage by all men and women. The meaning of the epiphany that occurs in this gospel passage is that the “the newborn king of the Jews” is revealed to and recognized by people from far and distant lands. The appearance of mystical signs in the sky makes the point that all of creation is changed by the appearance of Christ. Because God has chosen to become human, all creation and all the people of the earth can experience the redemption he has come to bring.

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