

+ EPIPHANY

January 6, 2017

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of king Herod, behold there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?”

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very Dear Sons,

In a true manner, the “epiphany” or manifestation of the Messiah, the anointed One, has occupied the entire history of salvation. It is a great beacon that shines both backward in time and forward, filling all the centuries until the end. Before His coming into the world, as we can read in the Old Testament, the Child, later to be revealed at the Epiphany, was made partially manifest in prophecies and figures, which, though veiled, remained clear enough for those poor enough in spirit, for those like Simeon and Anna, who would greet the Savior at His presentation at the Temple. In an earlier age, the pagan seer Balaam saw in spirit the star that would lead the Magi, the star that was really Christ Himself.

I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not near. A STAR SHALL RISE out of Jacob and a scepter shall spring up from Israel: and shall strike the chiefs of Moab, and shall waste all the children of Seth.¹

The meaning of Balaam’s prophecy, as given in a Targum or Jewish interpretation of the bible—this one written a century or so before Christ—says the following:

When the King shall arise out of Jacob, (and) the Messiah shall be anointed from Israel.²

Beginning in Bethlehem, at the Child’s birth, there comes the “epiphany” or “manifestation” of the Christ, no longer veiled, but made in the open, coming forth by small increments, step by step, not without disappointments along the way owing to the blindness of men, but as surely as the light of day. Thus, in the fullness of time, as we read in the Gospel, the light of the Savior begins to enlighten both Jews and Gentiles, although initially only in small numbers.

The mysterious figures of the Magi, to whom tradition has as given the title of “kings,”—these wise men we read about in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew—were surely astonished to find that the very “king of the Jews” they came to adore remained unknown to His own people, whose minds remained blind to the coming of the Messiah so long awaited. Only with the greatest difficulty were

¹ Numbers 24:17.

² Targum of Onkelos.

the travelers able to determine, in speaking with the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem, that there was, indeed, a prophetic expectation in Israel of a Messiah, the son of David, and that He was to be born in the little town of Bethlehem. The men from the East could only have been saddened and discouraged by this very cold welcome and lack of understanding, but the wonder and beginning of faith that had led them from their homes, after their reading of the stars—this supernatural instinct pushed them onward, and the star guided them all the way to the Holy Family. They were saddened, indeed, but this astonished sadness was merely the beginning. Eventually they would realize the danger they were in with respect to King Herod, who, as they began to understand, had evil designs upon the Child that was born. What terrible welcome for the Savior of mankind!

But the glory of Christ did grow and did fill the world. Although numbers do not tell the whole story, in 2010, just to take a convenient reference point, Christians represented about one third of the entire population of the world! Despite the truly virulent attacks upon Christianity from so many quarters, especially since the French Revolution and into modern times, there is no stopping the glory of Christ, the Epiphany of the true light.

What is the message of the Magi? What does their quest say to us? They certainly encourage us to leave the merely material, the comfortable tranquility of our human existence so as to be pilgrims in search of what is best and noblest in human life. Pope Francis has often emphasized this. All of us are looking for happiness, and the Wise Men show us both where it is to be found and how to find it. They indicate that the goodness we seek is somehow above us rather than below on earth—something written in the stars, which are a beautiful symbol of all that is heavenly, divine. The humanist philosophers of the nineteenth century, people like Marx and Nietzsche, argued forcibly for the elimination of God and of all aspirations for a life other than the temporal happiness of the here and now. Or, rather, they vainly pursued a theoretical human happiness that was to come at the end of the great Revolution, but it never happened and never will. How utterly wrong was this proud assertion of a new, earthly paradise alien to the Creator!

Without the Kingdom of Heaven as a crown to human endeavor, our earthly happiness itself would utterly vanish. In gazing fixedly at the earthly ideal one is led only to madness and despair, as was the case with poor Nietzsche. The message of the Magi is that we are not our own masters: we need to go and kneel before the true King, who, being both God and Man, is worthy of our adoration and able to make us participate in His own Divine Life. So, let us set out with these mysterious travelers—not physically but spiritually, mystically—in search of the Child, who alone is truly worthy of the title of king, who alone can bring sanity and joy back to our world. May His Immaculate Mother show Him and make Him smile for us. Amen. Alleluia.