

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Epiphany

St Matthew's Christmas Feast. It is by any standards spectacular, even delicious: it has been among the favourites for composers, for poets, for spiritual writers, and above all for *Renaissance artists*. What an opportunity for the free exercise of talent, in the painting of a great processional cavalcade, hung with glorious brocades, glittering with crowns and treasure, exotic with Eastern faces and complexions, riding on fabulous beasts, led by the Star of Bethlehem to worship in a stable. If it was irresistible for the artists, it was even more so for their patrons; it was their opportunity to finance the most expensive colours, like blue *lapis lazuli*, and gold leaf. The Magi were perhaps adopted as patron saints of the Medici family in Florence for this reason.

Manifestation

Epiphania is the Greek for *showing forth*; and if the Word becomes flesh at Christmas, it follows that he has to be seen. Of course, he was seen at Christmas by the shepherds, who represent Israel coming to know its God. But these Magi are not Jesus' fellow-Jews, but Gentiles. They have not come because of the expectancy of the prophets; they have been led here by their pagan religion – Zoroastrianism, the faith which scans the stars. What is the music of the spheres, which calls out these sky-watchers? Most dwellers in Western Europe will never know, because we've simply never seen the starry heavens. To see the stars you have to be a very long way from the nearest sodium streetlamp, preferably, I'm told, near the Equator. Then the brilliance of the sky at night bursts upon you, and you know why Arabs have always been great astronomers.

Light From Above

The Magi represent all the learning that can be achieved through human diligence alone. In studying the stars they are trying for the highest knowledge. Matthew was probably quite ready to believe that such a study might lead the Gentiles to God's city of Jerusalem, though he knew that by ourselves we humans could never imagine the whole truth about God. Still, God helps all sorts and conditions, and there is nothing to stop him rewarding these Magi with real knowledge by unsearchable ways of his own. It is noteworthy, however, that the fruit of such knowledge is their urgent pilgrimage to Jerusalem, seeking the newborn King. Herod questions Scribes as to the

expected birthplace of the Messiah, and this gives the astrologers the last piece of their jigsaw, the final direction; no-one can come to the Lord except through the Scriptures – *and you, Bethlehem...out of you shall come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel...*The wonderful thing, which gives them such great joy, is that the star which had led them to Jerusalem now reappears, shining brighter than ever – *when they saw it, they were filled with joy* – and indeed the joy is immense that comes to us when we realize that the Gospel confirms all the good we have ever known or learned to love. This is a direct consequence of the Incarnation: that God underlines the good he has made in his sending of the Son.

A Feast For Us

This is certainly a feast for us Gentiles. It is also a tremendously comforting feast for anyone involved in the world of learning. It can sometimes feel a little lonely in the hard-nosed academic world, where so many have no time for, or interest in, the things of God. Christians read the Scriptures with especial faith and love, and in the University these words do not cut very much ice. But here in the story of Epiphany are Gentiles whose journey has come a different way; they're ardent, committed, generous, adaptable, ready to accept help, open-minded; in the end, they arrive safely. Their faith is loveable, admirable; their presence in the Gospel is inspiring and consoling.
Fr Philip