

Feast of Epiphany C

On a cold evening, three farmers were warming themselves by the fireside. Soon two of them got into in a heated debate comparing their religions to decide which one was the true religion. After some time they turned to their friend and asked him, “Decide for us. Which religion is the right one?” He said thoughtfully, “Well, you know there are three ways to get from here to the mill. You can go right over the hill. That is shorter, but it is a steep climb. You can go around the hill on the right side. That road is short and wide, but it is rough and full of potholes. If you fall into some of those ditches you can hardly get out of them by yourself. Or you can go around the hill on the left side. That is the longest way, but it is also the easiest.” He paused and then added, “But you know, when you get there, the mill man is not concerned about how you got there, but what you have brought with you.”

In the stories of Jesus’ birth, two special groups of people came to visit the new-born babe: the shepherds and the magi. The church has no special feast to commemorate the visit of the shepherds, but we have this special feast of Epiphany today to celebrate the visit of the magi. Why is that? It is because the visit of the magi is an eye-opener. The shepherds learned of the birth of Jesus through a direct revelation from angels. This was a direct and supernatural revelation. The magi, on the other hand, learned of the birth of Jesus by observing a star. The star did not say anything to them. They had to interpret this natural sign of the star to know what it meant. They were nature worshippers whom we might call pagans. Yet they were able to find their way to God, reading the movements of the stars and other heavenly bodies.

The Jews before the coming of Christ believed that they were the chosen people and only they had access to God. Some time we, too, can make that mistake today about ourselves. That is why we are fascinated with the story of the visit of the magi. It is a unique story that opens our eyes to the fact that God is not limited to any one religious tradition. It tells us that Jesus is the savior of all. The shepherds who were regarded as unclean and could not take part in Temple worship without undergoing purification came to know Jesus the savior through a direct vision of angels. The pagan kings came to know of the savior through the reading of the stars. And King Herod and his scribes came to know of it through searching the scriptures. Visions, stars (through interpreting nature), and scriptures are different ways of arriving at the same truth. Of course, this does not mean that any religious tradition is just as good as the other. The Gospel says that the magi saw a star at its rising, and they interpreted that it meant the birth of the king of the Jews. But they could not get to him until they came to Jerusalem and inquired from King Herod. Herod called together the chief priests and the scribes to find out the place. They searched the scriptures and found out, “And you Bethlehem, land of Judah, from you shall come the ruler, who will shepherd my people Israel.” So the wise men needed the light of the Scriptures to direct them to Bethlehem. Over and above the natural light of the star, the magi still needed the supernatural light of scripture to finally get to Jesus.

The crucial question is: Who actually got to find Jesus? The shepherds got to Jesus because they received a direct revelation from God through the angel. Herod and his scribes who had the scriptures failed to find Jesus, but the magi who followed the natural light of the stars were able to find him. Why? Because the Jewish authorities, even though they possessed the shining truth of revealed scriptures, did not follow it. They did not walk in the light of the scriptures. The magi, on the other hand, who enjoyed only a star light followed its guidance. It is not the possession of the truth that matters, it is how prepared we are to walk in the light of the truth that we possess. It is better to have the dim light of the stars and follow it than to have the bright light of the Holy Scriptures and neglect them.

As Christians—especially as Catholics—we believe that we have the fullness of truth because ours is a religion revealed, not by a human being, but by God Himself through His son, Jesus. Who can reveal God better, other than one who was with Him? But what does that benefit us if we do not walk in the light of that truth? Nature worshippers or nonbelievers who are sincerely committed to following the dim light of natural reason may arrive at Jesus before us if we do not follow the truth of the Gospel. This is the challenging truth we celebrate today in the story of the pagan wise men who sought and found the Lord.