

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the Feast of the Epiphany (Year B)
“the magi’s expectations had to be revised”

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Reflections on **Isaiah 60:1-6; Eph. 3:2-3, 5-6; Mt. 2:1-12**

Tomorrow is Epiphany, the day the three kings arrive to complete our nativity scenes, right?

Actually, I suspect that for many of us, they arrived on the scene many days ago, because we Americans are in the habit of celebrating Christmas all at once, instead of spreading it out over twelve days and savoring each of its separate parts: the birth of the baby; the good news proclaimed to the shepherds; and then the surprising arrival of total strangers, who sensed that something cosmic was happening.

The three kings have seized the imagination of people even outside Christianity. Growing up in a non-Christian family, I was aware of the kings in somewhat the same way as I was aware of Noah's ark: it is a wonderful image, and one that appeals to a child's hope (and a grown-up's hope) that everything can be brought together in peace – all the animals getting along together in the ark, and all the world's peoples gathered around a baby in a manger. The three kings, with their gift-giving, and their exotic clothes, and their different skin tones, provide a very important vision—one not only for children.

Today's first reading also presents a very striking vision. It was written for a dispirited people who had recently come back to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. They were now facing the daunting task of rebuilding a ruined city and its centerpiece, the temple. So Isaiah presents a vision for Jerusalem as she will one day be again; a new day is dawning:

Arise, says Isaiah, and shine.

The city, atop Mt. Zion, has caught the first rays of the sun, and when the darkness now covering the earth below dissipates (metaphorically, of course), its inhabitants will see that the whole world is drawn to her. Jerusalem will once again hold a place of honor among the nations, and she will prosper as traders converge on her. Just as the Queen of Sheba once came, in the city's heyday—drawn by Solomon's reputation as a wise king, and bringing gold and vast quantities of spices, so will the camels and dromedaries come again. Or, as you heard in today's Psalm 72:

*Tarshish and the Isles will offer gifts
Arabia and Sheba will bring tribute
All other rulers will pay homage.*

But what is interesting to me is how our visions—necessary as they are—get revised as they meet the realities of our lives. There is a lot of *revising of vision* in our New Testament readings today, centered especially around the new inter-ethnic reality of the time. The new cultural situation is especially clear in the second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians:

*the Gentiles are heirs, as we are;
members of the body, as we are;
partakers of the promise of Jesus
the messiah . . . as we are.*

This was not as easy as it sounds! Matthew's church community, which was made up of a mixture of natural-born Jews and Gentile converts, was grappling with the cultural tensions that resulted from this. How could traditional Jews revise their identity, their sense of

themselves, to accommodate these foreigners? What gifts did the Gentiles bring from their own traditions, and would those gifts be appreciated?

So it is very interesting to see what Matthew does with this story. Clearly, he took inspiration from the vision of Isaiah and from Psalm 72, the gifts of gold and incense are obvious allusions to tradition. But there are significant shifts as well.

For one thing, the magi are not just receiving and admiring Jewish wisdom, as the Queen of Sheba had done. They have their own knowledge, which is what brings them to Jerusalem. In fact, Matthew calls these travelers “magi,” not “kings” (our tradition borrows that idea from Isaiah and Psalm 72). They are in possession of some mysterious knowledge—of stars, certainly, and who knows what else? But their knowledge is incomplete. They arrived in Jerusalem assuming their quest was about to be fulfilled. But what they encountered was a Jerusalem establishment whose vision was not only incomplete, but, in Herod's case, vicious.

This, to me, is the saddest part of Matthew's story—that Isaiah's splendid vision of Jerusalem had to be revised; the true genius of Jewish tradition had to be sought elsewhere. And the magi's expectations also had to be revised. The capital city had indeed recovered much of its magnificence: Herod, like Solomon, was a great builder and had thoroughly refurbished and expanded the temple, but the newborn “King of the Jews” was not to be found in Herod's palace.

And so the magi left the city of the kings and princes, the city of the chief priests, and continued their journey to a small, outwardly unimpressive town named Bethlehem – *Bethlehem, small as you are among Judah's clans*, as Micah

put it in a reading we heard two weeks ago (on the fourth Sunday of Advent).

It was in this humble town, in an ordinary Jewish house, that they received a true welcome, and at last the weary travelers knew that they had found what their hearts and minds were seeking.

This encounter was not what anybody had expected. Neither Mary and Joseph nor the magi had foreseen anything like it. There is no small amount of incongruity in the scene. Hugely expensive gifts (representing, of course, the best one has to offer, and fit for a king) were given to a baby in very humble circumstances. As has been noted, casseroles and diapers might have been more appropriate!

We, like the magi, have had to go beyond the splendor of Jerusalem, to worship in a simpler, more ordinary, Bethlehem. But here, in a borrowed, perhaps temporary, dwelling place, we have found what matters—a place where our hearts tell us we have arrived at a truth and a wealth more lasting than any other on earth.

So our hearts are prepared for what comes next, after we have stripped our trees of their lights and ornaments and taken them down to the curb, after we have packed the Holy Family, the shepherds, and the kings back in their boxes.

Now we are ready, as Howard Thurman has written, for the work of Christmas to begin:

**to find the lost, to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry, to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among all peoples,
to make music with the heart.**