

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Epiphany of the Lord

Year B

7 January 2024



Collect

May the splendour of your majesty, O Lord, we pray,
shed its light upon our hearts,
that we may pass through the shadows of this world
and reach the brightness of our eternal home.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The word “mystery” can mean many things. It can refer to something about which the facts are obscure. On the other hand it can refer to something which is so rich in meaning it can never be exhausted. It’s the latter usage that’s in play when we talk of “the mystery of the incarnation.” But there’s plenty of the first kind when it comes to Christmas and Epiphany. Where and when and how these feasts came to be observed still generates lively debate.

Given the wealth of associations that the Epiphany has had historically, especially in the Eastern Church, it’s quite surprising that the lectionary provides only one set of readings that is to be used every year. That makes the visit of the Magi the sole focus and ignores the other related “manifestations” of Jesus such as his birth, his baptism and the changing of the water into wine at Cana.

For all the exotic appeal of the story, the starlight that guides the Magi contrasts sharply with the darkness emanating from the court of Herod. Like Luke and John, Matthew wastes no time alerting his readers to the shadow cast by the cross even over the infant Jesus. As the searchers ask in T. S. Eliot’s famous poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?”

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

60:1–6

Arise, shine out Jerusalem, for your light has come,
the glory of the Lord is rising on you,
though night still covers the earth
and darkness the peoples.

Above you the Lord now rises
and above you his glory appears.
The nations come to your light
and kings to your dawning brightness.

Lift up your eyes and look round:
all are assembling and coming towards you,
your sons from far away
and daughters being tenderly carried.

At this sight you will grow radiant,
your heart throbbing and full;
since the riches of the sea will flow to you;
the wealth of the nations come to you;
camels in throngs will cover you,
and dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;
everyone in Sheba will come,
bringing gold and incense
and singing the praise of the Lord.

First Reading

One could well imagine this text being considered for the Christmas Midnight Mass. Even in the full blaze of day its opening summons still stirs: “Arise, shine out Jerusalem . . . the glory of the Lord is rising on you.” The jubilant spirit is sustained throughout, from the first words to the final phrase, “singing the praise of the Lord.” This joyful oracle is addressed to Jerusalem, but it is universal in scope. It envisages the holy city becoming the centre of the world. Not only will exiles return in gladness, but kings and nations will come to pay homage, bringing the wealth of the world with them. Matthew’s telling of the story of the Magi – foreigners coming from afar to acknowledge the one true God with gifts of gold and incense – is certainly in harmony with, if not directly inspired by, this prophetic vision. Readers should take the opportunity to proclaim this exuberant text with conviction and positive energy. Like Isaiah himself, they are announcing God’s own authoritative command to look with wonder at the revelation of divine glory. The affective tone of the reading grows stronger and stronger until the initial dawning of the light eventually discloses the tide of humanity streaming to Jerusalem with their gifts. The key thing for readers is to note that this is a fully-charged visionary poem, not a low-key narrative. They enter fully into its spirit and deliver it at a pace that allows the congregation to savour its richness. Naturally they will have checked the pronunciation of unfamiliar words.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 71:1–2, 7–8, 10–13

R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

O God, give your judgment to the king,
to a king’s son your justice,
that he may judge your people in justice
and your poor in right judgment. **R.**

In his days justice shall flourish
and peace till the moon fails.
He shall rule from sea to sea,
from the Great River to earth’s bounds. **R.**

The kings of Tarshish and the sea coasts
shall pay him tribute.
The kings of Sheba and Seba
shall bring him gifts.
Before him all kings shall fall prostrate,
all nations shall serve him. **R.**

For he shall save the poor when they cry
and the needy who are helpless.
He will have pity on the weak
and save the lives of the poor. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Scattered through the Book of Psalms are several that are commonly called “royal,” in that they centre in one way or another on the person of the king. The king was understood to represent the people before God and in turn to rule over them in God’s name. These royal psalms pay tribute to the king and idealise his role. In fact the majority of kings whose stories are recorded in the Old Testament wantonly betrayed the trust placed in them. The psalms therefore point beyond any current occupant of the throne to a future ruler anointed by God. Christian believers identify this messiah with Jesus of Nazareth.

In Psalm 71/72 the king is praised for his wisdom, right judgment, eminence, protection of the weak and care of the poor. These are all attributes of the God of Israel whose rule the king is meant to mirror. The psalm echoes Isaiah’s oracle of a golden era, not for Jerusalem and its people however, but for the person of the king. The response – “Lord, every nation on earth will adore you” – reinforces this personal focus.

The psalm’s reference to kings bringing tribute anticipates the gospel and no doubt contributes to the legend that the Magi were kings. The two issues for readers to attend to are the pronunciation of the place names (“Tarshish,” “Sheba” and “Seba”) and the extra length of the third verse.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians **3:2–3, 5–6**

You have probably heard how I have been entrusted by God with the grace he meant for you, and that it was by a revelation that I was given the knowledge of the mystery. This mystery that has now been revealed through the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets was unknown to any men in past generations; it means that pagans now share the same inheritance that they are parts of the same body, and the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the gospel.

A reading from the holy Gospel **according to Matthew**

2:1–12

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant king of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 'At Bethlehem in Judaea,' they told him 'for this is what the prophet wrote:

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah
you are by no means least among the leaders of
Judah,
for out of you will come a leader
who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. 'Go and find out all about the child,' he said 'and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

Second Reading

In the verse preceding the text for today's feast, the author of Ephesians describes himself as "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." It's notoriously difficult to reconstruct a reliable chronology of Paul's life and letters, but references like this continue to persuade some scholars that Ephesians was written by Paul himself while he was imprisoned there. Others argue that it's a later work written by a disciple in Paul's name. Either way, the reading is Pauline in character, notably the author's claim to a personal revelation and apostolic mission.

The "mystery" revealed to Paul is two-fold in nature. The more specific reference is to the good news of non-Jews becoming heirs to the promises made to Israel. The other and broader reference is the whole of God's saving plan for humanity, now made known in Jesus Christ. Paul is spelling out the theological implications of the story Matthew tells in the gospel.

In this instance Paul's line of thought is relatively straight-forward, helped by the omission of his aside in verse 4. The language too is uncomplicated. However, as usual the sentences are long, with the central assertions extended by a number of subordinate clauses. Readers will need to proclaim the text with deliberation and to vary their tone to help the assembly distinguish between trunk and foliage. In sum, readers should aim to convey Paul's delight in sharing this revelation.

While the NRSV leaves the long sentences intact, it does set the reading out in short lines which would be worth examining. As usual it uses inclusive language.

Gospel

Matthew's account of the visit of the magi has all the ingredients of a gripping drama for stage or screen. Seekers from afar, mysterious signs, corruption at court, unwitting authorities, and a vulnerable target all make for an exciting story. Matthew, however, is not out to entertain his readers but to enlighten them.

He achieves three things at least. He identifies the Christ-child as the long-awaited messiah; he anticipates the apostles' mission to preach the good news to all nations (28:19); and he foreshadows the conspiracy that will succeed in executing God's anointed one.

A corollary of Matthew's story-telling success is the wealth of invention it has sparked ever since, especially about the number and identity of the magi (whom Matthew never names as kings) and about the meaning of their gifts. For all the charm of this creative imagination, it is important not to lose sight of Matthew's purpose.

Except for allusions in some Christmas carols, today is the only day in the annual cycle of readings that this story is told. Summer holidays may mean smaller congregations, but those who attend would be blessed to hear it proclaimed with flair and preached on with insight.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah 60:1–6

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 3:2–3, 5–6

Surely you have already heard of the commission
of God's grace that was given me for you,
and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.
In former generations
this mystery was not made known to humanity
as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets
by the Spirit:
that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs,
members of the same body,
and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew 2:1–12

In the time of King Herod,
after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,
“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?
For we observed his star at its rising,
and have come to pay him homage”.
When King Herod heard this, he was frightened,
and all Jerusalem with him;
and calling together
all the chief priests and scribes of the people,
he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea;
for so it has been written by the prophet:
'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"
Then Herod secretly called for the wise men
and learned from them the exact time
when the star had appeared.
Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,
"Go and search diligently for the child;
and when you have found him,
bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage".
When they had heard the king, they set out;
and there, ahead of them,
went the star that they had seen at its rising,
until it stopped over the place where the child was.
When they saw that the star had stopped,
they were overwhelmed with joy.
On entering the house,
they saw the child with Mary his mother;
and they knelt down and paid him homage.
Then, opening their treasure chests,
They offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they left for their own country by another road.

Blessing for Epiphany

May God, who has called us
out of darkness into his wonderful light,
pour out in kindness his blessing upon us
and make our hearts firm
in faith, hope and charity.
Amen.

And since in all confidence we follow Christ,
who today appeared in the world
as a light shining in darkness,
may God make us, too,
a light for our brothers and sisters.
Amen.

And so when our pilgrimage is ended,
may we come to him
whom the Magi sought as they followed the star
and whom they found with great joy, the Light from Light,
who is Christ the Lord.
Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Epiphany, Roman Missal p 711)