



From Deacon Mark Miller's Desk

This Sunday, we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. It may or may not be a celebration of what you think it is. Let's try to unravel some of the confusion about the feast.

It's traditionally called Three Kings Day even though there are no kings, and we don't know how many of them there were. Mathew Chapter Two states, "behold, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem ...". A Magi was an astrologer. These Magi may have also been Zoroastrian priests – a religion dating from 6th century BC originally based in modern-day Iran. [An aside for lovers of sci-fi movies: Zoroastrianism's first leader was Zarathustra; that name will be familiar to any fan of 2001: A Space Odyssey. But I digress]. So why do we call them Kings? Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah 60:3 and two of the Psalms – 68 and 72 – say the Messiah will be worshipped by kings. Early readers of Mathew's Gospel connected his "Magi" with the Old Testament "Kings"; by 500 AD the tradition of "Three Kings" was accepted throughout the church.

If we're not sure they were, indeed, kings, at least we know their names, right? Well, not really. Here in the Western Christian tradition, we've assigned them the names:

- Caspar – an Ethiopian scholar
- Melchior – a Persian scholar
- Balthasar – an Arabian scholar

There is, however, no documentation to support those names. Syrian Christians know them as: Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas.

The tradition of "Three Kings" rests on the number of gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts hold two meanings. In recognition of Jesus' human nature, all three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. Myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable. These same gifts have a spiritual meaning as well; gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death.

The feast of the Epiphany celebrates the revelation of his Son as fully human in Jesus Christ. Christ as fully human and fully God is what we profess when we pray "and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man". [Nicene Creed]. Epiphany means manifestation, which the dictionary clarifies is "an illuminating discovery". In this feast, we celebrate the manifestation of Christ:

- to the wise men from the east
- to the Jews at His Baptism by John
- in his public ministry with the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana

In this one feast, we celebrate God's revelation of His Son to the whole world. This is the celebration of the "manifestation of Our Lord" to the wider, Gentile world, which was represented by the Magi. Before this manifestation, only the shepherds at Bethlehem were told of Christ's birth. The remainder of the Jewish community would not come to know Christ for many years [his Baptism]. Saint Pope Leo I [who ruled from 440 to 461] taught that the adoration the Magi extended to the infant Jesus marks the beginning of the Christian faith.

The Magi have lessons to teach us, even today. They were taking a big risk when they decided to follow a star in the sky. They didn't know where they were going. They didn't know how long it would take them to get to their destination. They had to worry about a hundred details, small and large. They had to set all that to the side and trust in their faith. What a tremendous example to us! Like the Magi, we have to put our trust in God. We have to trust that He knows what's best for us. We have to trust that His plan, no matter how hard [or impossible!] it seems will lead us to the place we need to be. We have to place our trust in God in all things. Like the Magi, we need to fix our sight on God and take the journey he has planned for us.

Before we leave the Three Kings behind, we can't forget that they play a role in the traditional blessing of one's home for the new year. This blessing is performed by taking the first two numbers of the year [20], adding the first initials of their Western names [C+M+B], and end with the last two numbers of the new year [22] and writing the phrase over the top of the door[s] in the home – especially the front door and bedrooms, often in chalk. In addition to the first letters of their names, they also stand for the Latin phrase "Christus mansionem benedicat," or, "Christ, bless this house." This sign of blessing looks like this "20+C+M+B+22".