

.... and They Went a Different Way

The Epiphany of The Lord – January 3, 2021

Readings: Isa 60:1-6; Eph 3:2-3a,5-6; Mt 2:1-12

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (Mt 2:12)

Prologue: The Solemnity of the Epiphany presents many evocative symbols and images for reflection and response: lights, star, threatened king, wise pilgrims, dreams, pathways, gifts, worship and so on. However, in preparation for the Golden Jubilee of the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences [FABC 50]—which has chosen for its theme: “... *and they went a different way*” (Mt 2:12)—we could reflect on the “way” they chose to reach Christ, and, after being warned in a dream, the “different way” they chose to return to their own native lands.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. *Wise Men from the East to Jerusalem — The Way Outward:* The ‘magi’ or ‘wise men’ were considered as ‘pagans’ when viewed from a Judaic centralist religious perspective. Even if they were deemed as wise in disposition and well-versed in the mysterious science of astrology by the Jews, they were hardly considered knowledgeable in matters of scripture and religion. Nevertheless, their experience and expertise in stargazing enthused them to venture out into unfamiliar and unknown territory. They leave their comfort zones, so to say, in order to seek the truth. Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, is the big centre, where one would expect anything striking and of significance to happen. After a long journey, they reach Jerusalem and ask: “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” (v.2). Astrologers believe that everyone has a star that governs one’s origins, one’s life and one’s destiny. Leaving aside whatever that ‘star’ was and wherever it disappeared and reappeared, God seems to use the star to draw the magi outward and onward in a personal spiritual quest. Moreover, there is also an ancient prediction of Balaam that: “a star shall come out of Jacob” (Num 24:17). Prompted by scripture passages like this, evangelist Matthew is keen to point out that the first to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews are Gentiles from the East. In the magi, Matthew sees an anticipation of Jesus’ promise: “Many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (8:11). The arrival of the magi to Jerusalem is the first step of the ‘*epiphany*’, literally, an ‘outward manifestation’ of the Christ to the world beyond the so-called ‘chosen people’.
2. *Jerusalem and Bethlehem — Two Contrasting Ways: Outer and Inner:* Besides their geographical and spatial location, Jerusalem and Bethlehem can be seen as two symbols of contrasting relevance and governance. The placing of Herod the apparent ‘king of the Jews’ by appointment (v.3) in Jerusalem makes it a centre of political power. Furthermore, Herod’s “calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people” (v.4) also gives Jerusalem added religious and juridical-theological power. Aren’t palaces and temples sites of political and religious power that we all look up to in order to further and foster our own sociopolitical and religious-spiritual agenda, respectively? Why then does the passage tell us that “he [Herod] was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him”? (v.3) Doesn’t such widespread fear seem unnecessary and unfounded? Looking at the cause of such fear, namely, the birth of another newborn so-called ‘king of the Jews’ at Bethlehem, one really wonders: ‘why’? Though pagan Herod would at

most have heard rumours about some future Messiah, it would only be the chief priests and scribes—experts in the Law and Prophets—who would be able to instruct Herod that there were, indeed, messianic predictions about Bethlehem. They quote Micah (5:2), “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.” Interestingly, in the juxtaposition of Jerusalem with Bethlehem we have the seeds of a reversal of roles, the rewriting of history, an overturning of hierarchical pyramids: Christ, king by anointment will triumph over Herod, king by appointment; the power of love will crush the love of power; littleness will dominate bigness; God’s emptiness will be fuller than Man’s fullness; God will be encountered more in the inner sanctuary than in outer temple. Indeed, a new pathway is being cut out in the heart of humankind. King Herod “then sent them [magi] 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’” (v.8). His deceitful words are not aimed at worship, but violence.

3. *The Different Way — Worship, and Back to the East, Homeward*: Egged on by Herod, the magi “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*.” (vv.9-10). Unlike as in Luke’s gospel, phrases like “*overwhelmed with joy*” are rarely found in Matthew’s. They indicate that the Christic Epiphany is an extraordinary revelation that must be proclaimed to all nations. The magi see mother and child. Was Joseph, the worker, busy with providing for his family’s basic needs? One will never know. But the magi’s worship of the Messiah and the opening up of their “treasure chests” (v.11)—to offer him gold, frankincense, myrrh, symbolising his kingship, lordship and mortality, respectively—is an overflow of the treasured emotions in their “chests”, their hearts, so to say. Their costly, external gifts are but expression of the priceless inner graces received. Then like Joseph, “being warned in a dream” (v.12), “they went a different way ...” Life can never be the same after one encounters the Christ in the depths of one’s heart.

Linking First and Second Readings, as well as the Psalm to the Theme:

In the first reading Isaiah describes Jerusalem’s post-exilic glory and invites all peoples to congregate at this ‘city of God-Light’. However, the Good News of God’s salvation must go beyond. Thus, the responsorial refrain says: “All nations shall fall prostrate before you, O Lord.” To be ‘catholic’ is always to be universal and inclusive of all God’s children. Writing from a prison in Rome to the Ephesians whom he has catechized and converted to Christianity around the years 53-56 AD, Paul reminds them that he is a *servant* (v.7), saying: “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, 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” (vv.5-6). Do we see people of other faiths as “fellow heirs” and “members of the same body”?

Three ‘Ways’ that Call for Reflection:

Way of the Star: that invites one to leave familiar shores and travel outward. Am I ready to look up and look ahead, ready to leave my comfort zone to follow where He leads me?

Ways of Jerusalem and Bethlehem: are contrasting and often conflicting. Which do I choose? centre or the periphery? truth or deceit? smallness or largeness? internal or external?

Ways that are Different and Roads Less Travelled: Having worshipped the Christ in the inner recesses of my being through God’s Spirit, what ‘different way’ can I embark upon? As wise men and women from the East, what different *Margas* can I/We offer? ... **End**