

## **Every knee shall bow**

Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon for Epiphany

We in the West celebrate Christmas from Christmas Day to Epiphany, and then we say the Twelve Days of Christmas are over. But in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, they celebrate Christmas on the sixth of January, yesterday, what we call Epiphany.

In the Western Church this means that we forget about Epiphany, and that is really too bad because it is a major festival. The word itself means “shining forth,” and it is celebrated at this time because the days are growing longer. The light is coming back. We’re celebrating the fact that we are no longer in darkness. You know the great place in Isaiah 9:2 that we use at Christmas: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Over against the darkness, we celebrate the light.

Darkness threatens us at every turn. We struggle with chaos. One of the ways to talk about the darkness is to talk about the darkness of the tomb. We are talking here about the fact that God has come to bring light into our darkness. In the celebration of Epiphany, the coming of the light, we have the story of the wisemen. People like it. It’s colorful and exotic.

To begin with, we should note that in this account in Matthew 2:1-12, there are some things that are missing. First of all, there are no camels. That detail is from the Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 60:6: “A multitude of camels . . . shall come.”

Then what about the gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt 2:11)? Here in the same verse in Isaiah (60:6) it says: “They shall bring gold and frankincense.” The same thing is true in Psalm 72 (vs. 10: “gifts,” vs. 15: “gold”).

We think there were three wisemen, but the text doesn’t say that. It says there were three kinds of gifts. There may have been many wisemen. Of course, it also doesn’t give us names. Many centuries later people started thinking up names and even races for them. One of them was black because we had to have something from that part of the world. But there is nothing of this sort of thing in the text.

We have the famous hymn: “We three kings of Orient are,” but the Matthew text doesn’t say anything about kings coming. Once again, Isaiah 60 does and Psalm 72. That’s where we get that idea of kings coming.

It’s also important to realize that the Matthew text doesn’t say anything about wisemen. That’s the common translation. They were wise, therefore they saw the star, therefore they came. The Greek word in the original text is the root of word from which we get “magician” and “astrology.” That’s what they were.

We get into all kinds of things about the star. Was it a certain constellation? By such distractions we miss what the whole account is about. The account as to do with the fact that in Isaiah 60 as well as in Psalm 2 and Psalm 72, when everything comes to the end, everything will flow to Jerusalem. In their common way of thinking Jerusalem was the center of the world. Their understanding was that all powers would come and bow down.

Here's where it's important to know something about kings in the ancient world. The king was the one who was not only the ruler of the nation but was also the one who was in touch with God. Psalm 2:7 states: "You are my Son." That is repeated in Isaiah 42:1. They understood that the king is also kind of God. Every year they celebrated the reenactment of the enthronement of the king. We see that in Psalm 2.

What's really important in the text is that these religions come and bow their knees. The religion of the ancient world, the major religion by far, was magic. Magic-astrology. What the text is saying is that the religious powers of the world bow down.

In that day the people didn't just bow from the waist down, they got on their knees and touched their foreheads to the floor. That's the sign of submission, of homage. This is what is happening in this text. The pagan religion of astrology and magic, the major religion of the day, comes and bows down. It is not the one in charge. This one, this babe, is King of kings and Lord of lords.

It is important to ask ourselves: What does this mean for us today? Many people today are caught up in astrology, but the real paganism of our day is spirituality. That's what catches us and leads us astray. This year in this season of Epiphany we're going to take up this problem. It may be possible to say today that spirituality is the spirit of the anti-Christ. But, you may object, isn't there Christian spirituality? That's what we have to ask about.

What is the problem with spirituality? Spirituality is our modern form of magic and astrology. Spirituality is that which says if we just use the right words, go through certain formulas, and go through certain actions, then we can make it happen. We can make it happen and be spiritual. And then we can look for results. One says: "I got a boost out of that." Another one says: "I had a dream, a special experience, and that's what it's about." It seems spiritual, as if that is what is really real.

We can go to some astonishing places in the New Testament that speak to this. The first one is John 12:32: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself." (Just like Jerusalem.) The same is true in that great hymn in Philippians 2:5-11. At the end of the hymn, after it talks about the fact that Jesus has come and died on the cross, it says in verse 9-11: "Therefore God has highly exalted and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

What we are doing as we celebrate Epiphany and celebrate this account that we call the wisemen, we are celebrating the fact that this is the one who is Lord of lords and King of kings and that all the various kinds of religions and claims to be spiritual are broken. They not only bow the knee; they pound the pavement with their foreheads because they're not it.

The message of Epiphany is this Lordship. We have this great treasure, and it is important that it is not be something corrupted and sidetracked by saying: "Well, you have to feel right." Or: "You have to have this experience," because it is what he does and not anything that we do. That is the great message of freedom. Amen