

In the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy a few years ago, I saw no less than eight paintings of the Gospel of the visit of the magi to Jesus we just heard for this feast of Epiphany. Among them were the works of masters: Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albrecht Durer. The journey or the arrival of the Magi is one of the most popular themes in all of Christian art.

Why is that so, do you think? Of course, Matthew's narrative is a spectacular portrait in words, sufficient enough inspiration, one would suppose, for any artist. The story has something in it for everyone: mysterious visitors from the east, spectacular celestial phenomenon, the birth of a king, a threat to the life of an infant hero, divine revelation in a dream, political intrigue, unexpected treasures of the ancient world given as gifts. All of these things delight and enchant, entertain and cause wonder again and again down through the Christian centuries.

It is surprising that Matthew's story can still do that even for a modern audience, jaded by technology and the spectacular special-effects we see in movies these days. But a modern audience of this Gospel might be more inclined to ask whether these things really happened as Matthew wrote them. They are likely to ask whether this is real or make believe. We want to know whether this narrative is a fairy tale. The answer to those questions is easy enough, isn't it? No, this is definitely not make-believe. No, this is no fairy-tale. This a very serious narrative, deadly serious. This deceptively simple story deals with ultimate questions, questions about our destiny, our salvation, questions about reality and our place in God's plan for the redemption of the human race.

What exactly is this story we have just heard and what does it mean?

These are the harder questions. Matthew reports a real event, the birth the Messiah, the birth of Emmanuel, the God who is with us, the one who God has appointed to save us from our sins. He reports this event along with its interpretation, its significance for the world. He reports it along with the ways in which the apostles preached the Good News. He uses all the skill at his command, as did later artists, borrowing images from the Hebrew Scriptures to show that God has now fulfilled ancient promises made through the prophets.

Contrast the writings of the Apostle Paul with Matthew. Paul reveals almost nothing about the details of the life of Jesus, never directly quotes any of his words, that we know about. We are not sure whether he even met him before that encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. Paul tells us that Jesus died for our sins, according to the Scripture, that he was buried, that he was raised from the dead, in accord with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to many. He spends all of his energy explaining the faith to the communities he founded and what this faith means for their behavior. In his letter to the Ephesians you heard today, he captures exactly the significance of this feast: "IT HAS NOW BEEN REVEALED TO HIS HOLY APOSTLES AND PROPHETS BY THE SPIRIT: THAT THE GENTILES ARE COHEIRS, MEMBERS OF THE SAME BODY, AND COPARTNERS IN THE PROMISE IN CHRIST JESUS THROUGH THE GOSPEL." Which account do you prefer, which do you remember better? Matthew's or Paul's?

In the Gospel today, Matthew teaches that the Gentiles share in the salvation bestowed by Israel's God. Here is the beginning of the fulfillment of the hope of those people God has been preparing from creation. The

visit of the magi to child foreshadows that inclusive church known to Paul even in that first generation after the death of Christ. God cannot be Lord of all unless the Gentiles participate in his saving plan. God's kingdom is not complete as long as there are people outside it, as long as some are reckoned as strangers and foreigners.

Perhaps this is why the Bishops of Minnesota have declared this to be Immigration Sunday. They said this: "On this day, we are reminded that all human beings—regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, race, creed, or status—are (quoting St. Paul) 'coheir, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise of Jesus Christ.' We are called to treat all people as daughters and sons of God, sisters and brothers in Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit. As members of Christ's Body, we are also called to advocate for immigration policies that are humane, just, and build the common good." (End quote). The bishops ask for policies based on Catholic social teaching, policies that recognize the inherent dignity of every human being, policies that seek to reunite, stabilize, and strengthen families; that ease the path to citizenship for our undocumented sisters and brothers; policies that provide access to basic necessities; that embody due process protections, and that reflect an awareness of the social, political, and economic causes of migration."

What I found especially fascinating about the those museum paintings of the Visit of the Magi was this. The backgrounds the masters painted were not first-century Palestine. The artists made no effort to reproduce the scenery from Matthew's Gospel as it must have been. The background they painted is from the fifteen and sixteenth century in Europe. Here are renaissance buildings in ruins. Here are soldiers jousting. Here is

the flora and geography of Italy. Included with the figures of the magi are the portraits of the local patrons of the artists, the medici, for example, the local rulers, local patron saints, for example, Francis, Cosmos and Damian, Anthony of Padua. Here is a procession (a parade, really) through the streets of Florence on the feast of Epiphany with the Confraternity of Magi, a fraternal order of the day. Those participating, the leading citizens of the city, are dressed as eastern potentates.

Do you see what the masters did? They painted their world into the pictures because they recognized Matthew's narrative as a story about themselves and their times. They recognized in the journey of the magi their own journey of faith. That is our way as well. We have to paint ourselves into Matthew's narrative. We have to see the journey of the magi as our journey as well. Not fairy-tale, not make-believe, but a most formidable journey of faith, a journey into light, a revelation, an epiphany. This is God's holy word to us who so often fail to recognize the hidden God among us, who so often fail to respond to the first words of the adult Jesus: Repent and believe the Gospel.

Why is the visit of the magi so popular. Perhaps because they understood Scripture better than we do. Perhaps they understood precisely the significance of this event: they as Gentiles were included in the promises of God. They, like Israel of old, were called upon to be a light to the nations. They understood that those words from Isaiah applied to them: "UPON YOU THE LORD SHINES, AND OVER YOU APPEARS HIS GLORY."