

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Epiphany
January 7, 2018
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Right from the outset of his gospel Saint Matthew wants us to know something important. What he wants us to know is amazing given that this man was *Jewish*. Matthew's Christianity was never very far from believing God is best pleased when Jewish practices are maintained. Yet the evangelist places at the start and end of his gospel account incidents from the life of Christ which refute Matthew's own claim of Jewish pride of place.

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel there is the Great Commission. Christ says: "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (28:19-20) Near the beginning of his gospel, this universal claim and appeal was already announced in the infancy stories. *From the very beginning*, Christ Jesus was drawing all men unto Him. At the Epiphany divine guidance was given not to Jews but to men who were not Jews at all and who never became Jews. The Wise Men came to Bethlehem with their gifts, acknowledged Jesus as God's Chosen One, then left Palestine and went home.

By giving us the Epiphany narrative, (and St Matthew is the only evangelist who does so), he is endorsing something St Peter had discovered about the Lord Jesus and also put into words: "God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he who feareth him and worketh righteousness is acceptable to him."

The Magi probably did not know the Hebrew Scriptures. In the gospels and the teaching of the Church you and I have God's light. In the sacraments we are accorded the overflowing gifts of God's grace. But the Magi worked with none of that. Instead, they applied three strengths to such lights and insights as God had given them: *generosity*, *sincerity of heart*, and *perseverance*. Generosity, for it may have taken up to two years to find the Christ Child. These men were generous with their time. Sincerity of heart was another attribute. With St Augustine the Wise Men could say "Our souls are restless until they rest in Thee." And perseverance, for if anyone could have stopped the Wise Men dead in their tracks it was King Herod!

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The Shepherds at Bethlehem had received precise instructions on where to find the Christ Child. Not so the Magi. This makes them an inspiration and model for us. Like them we do not have to chafe and fret when a clearer revelation is apparently given to someone else. God has His reasons. The Magi are proof Almighty God always gives us sufficient light and strength to bring us to the end of our journey. What Christ said to St Paul on the Damascus Road applies to the Wise Men and to us as well: “My grace is sufficient for thee.”

The winning ticket is God’s grace plus the determined act of your will. It is not enough to see the star and know that it shows the way to Christ. *The light must be followed*, and all the perseverance, generosity, and sincerity of the Magi may still be required of us. If we do not act, the star will disappear. But if we act as God gives us the light, then what came to the Magi, please God, may come to us: spiritual insight, increased ardor, and resolution. These are the very things which led them to the Child.

The old prophetic exhortation used at Epiphany is still good: “Arise, shine, for the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.” We are to listen to the prophetic voice. And then with the Wise Men we are to respond with generosity, perseverance, and sincerity of heart, and come to the Throne of Grace.