

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Epiphany  
January 6, 2019

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We all love the Epiphany account of the Wise Men. In *The Book of Common Prayer* this feast was subtitled “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”. One of the remarkable things is that it is Saint Matthew the Evangelist who includes this incident in his gospel. St Matthew was Jew whose Christian viewpoint believed God is best pleased when *Jewish* practices are maintained in the Church. If it is fair to paint the four gospels using a broad brush we might say St Mark’s is the gospel according to St Peter, Luke’s gospel gives prominence to women, John’s gospel is the most exalted and has a different approach and sources. Matthew’s Gospel is the most Jewish of the four.

Consider what Matthew has done in just his first two chapters to proclaim the good news of God in Christ. Right at the start there is the genealogy of Jesus, and the announcement to Joseph the Child would be the Davidic Messiah. Here are reminiscences of Old Testament annunciations about the births of Isaac and Samuel. And after the appearance of the Wise Men, Matthew tells us Joseph took the Holy Family into Egypt to escape a wicked king. This recalls the story of Moses in reverse. And like Moses, the Holy Family then comes from Egypt to the Promised Land. All this is thoroughly Jewish. And Matthew quotes *Hosea 11:1* to seal the deal. All this would resonate with St Matthew’s Jewish readers.

But then in the midst of this traditional linkage divine guidance is given to men who were not Jews at all and who never became Jews! They came from afar, acknowledged God’s Chosen One, offered Him their gifts, and departed to their own country. In his Chapter Two St Matthew was describing something which resulted from Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension and the coming of the Holy Ghost. The Resurrection is good news for the whole world, for Jew and Gentile alike. The Gospel proclaims the universal call of Christ.

As the result of the Resurrection the gospel drew believers who were Gentiles. *The Acts of the Apostles* and the epistles of St Paul describe the growing pains of the Universal Church. St Matthew himself was among the good people who still believed without Divine Revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures Gentiles could only go so far. It was *to the Jews* that the fullest revelation of God had come. Before the

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coming of Christ it was only through nature God revealed Himself in any way at all to all who stood outside the Old Testament covenant.

We can appreciate how this belief is reflected in the Epiphany account as presented by St Matthew. This thoroughly-Jewish evangelist reminds us the Wise Men received revelation through astronomy. It was an imperfect revelation that brought them close to Christ but *not to the Christ Child*. It is no coincidence that only after consulting King Herod's scholars the Wise Men knew to go on to Bethlehem. The ultimate secret of the whereabouts of Christ was locked up in the Holy Scriptures.

What do we learn from all this? First, the Gentiles, led by their observation of creation, came to worship, but must learn from the Jews. And second, those who have the Scriptures, (as did King Herod's scholars), and can see plainly what the prophets foretold, may not be willing themselves to worship the King. That is precisely what was going on in the world when St Matthew wrote his gospel. Many of those who had the Scriptures rejected Jesus, while Gentiles came, and with the aid of those same Scriptures, found and worshipped the Child.

Some people are troubled by the incident of the Wise Men. It is not our experience a star in the sky can stand over a house to identify it! But the Epiphany is far more than a story with mystical and romantic appeal. It reveals the good news of God in Christ. It is an endorsement by the most Jewish of evangelists of what St Peter once said: "God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he who feareth Him and worketh righteousness is acceptable to Him." *Acts 10:34*

Think of the events of the Epiphany as the gospel in miniature. In His Beloved Son Almighty God has made Himself present to us. This is a contradiction to some, but brings the good news of salvation to all those throughout the whole world who have eyes to see.