

It happened with very little fanfare. This past Friday was the Day of Epiphany. What is that? It is a day on the calendar of the Western Christian Church on which you are invited to remember the journey of the wise men to worship Jesus. (And the word “epiphany” means that something has appeared; something new has been realized. That “something” is, of course, Jesus. God With Us.)

There’s some time that passes between Christmas and Epiphany—twelve days, to be precise--and that’s intentional. The clues in Matthew’s gospel give the impression that wise men arrived some time after the events of Jesus’ birth. One of those clues is the fact that Matthew tells us the wise men found the Holy Family in a house, so it seems a little time had passed; rooms had opened up; they had upgraded from the stable. If you’ve ever wondered why the Church waits to mention the mysterious Magi, that’s why. A little time passes between shepherds and wise men.

Have you ever wondered who these wise men were? Where were they from—besides “the East”? What was it about the star that caused them to undertake such an expensive journey? Matthew keeps the details to a minimum, and where Scripture is silent, people love to fill in the blanks.

For example, there’s the old Epiphany carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Dr. Paul Maier points out in his book “The First Christmas” that in just the opening line of that song, three assumptions are made that are worthy of examination. The first is the number three. “We **Three** Kings.” The three wise men...it is simply assumed that three magi came to worship the newly-born King of Israel. But a close reading of Matthew 2 reveals that Matthew never mentions a number in connection with the wise men. The only group of three we are told about is the three gifts given to Jesus; and from that the conclusion was made: three gifts, three givers; one gift per wise man. Now that’s possible—but it’s also possible that there were two or twelve. Matthew never says.

Next, there’s the “Kings” of the title, which probably says too much. Historical research tells us that magi were not kings *per se*, but would likely serve as top advisers to heads of state in the ancient world. The name says a lot: Magi were both magistrates and magicians. They were part college professor; part doctor; part astrologer; part fortune teller. Today they might be called “futurists.” But whatever they were, they were not Chief Executives—more like cabinet members.

Then there’s the “Orient” of the title. That’s probably going a little too far east, given what we know about the Magi of Babylon and Persia (which correspond to modern-day Iraq and Iran). Located east of Israel, the histories of those cultures provide us with most of what we know about Magi, and in the case of Babylon, there would have been direct interaction between Israelites and Magi during the exiles, which may explain why the Magi were interested in this particular star in the first place.

All of which is to say that the Magi are mysterious, fascinating figures. But there is no mystery as to why they made the journey. It was to worship the Child. It was to present their gifts to the King. God had met them where they were at, right there in their astronomy charts, and told them, the world-changer has come. About that Matthew leaves no doubt.

So here’s a review of the facts we know: some non-Jewish, well-educated individuals went through a lot of personal and political trouble to bring their gifts; their worship; to Jesus. On a global level, this signifies that Jesus is for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social standing. Closer to home, we see the wise men bring Jesus their gifts and their worship...and it creates the chance to ask ourselves, “What gift do I have for Jesus? What gift can I bring the King of creation?”

After all, he is the greatest gift, born into the world to help the helpless—to save us from eternal darkness—to bathe us in the life-giving light of his forgiveness. His birth and perfect life—his

suffering and death—his own resurrection and ascension into heaven to rule over everything—all is pure gift. Jesus is God’s gift to us. We would be spiraling downward to destruction if He were not given to us. But Jesus was given—God, in flesh and blood, came to rescue you and me. And Jesus continues to be given—that same flesh and blood is offered in His Church through wine and bread for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus continues to be given—His words invite you to turn away from sin, and to believe in Him. Jesus continues to be given, as His Body, all gathered believers, serve the world in His Name. There’s no other gift like this. The gift of Jesus cannot be exhausted. His love never runs out. He is always available to you.

So as we kneel alongside the Magi, I ask you again, what gift will you bring to Jesus? I once asked a group of four and five-year-olds that same question: “What gift will you bring to Jesus?” and do you know what one little girl said? She immediately answered, “My heart.” I’m not sure a better answer could be given to that question. “My heart is the gift I will bring.”

What else would Jesus want? He wants your heart, which means He desires your love. Will you give him that gift?

Epiphany means something new has been realized. A new way of relating to God. A way that is governed not by fear, or duty, or obligation. It is, instead, the way of love. Love for Jesus, as you respond to who He is and what He has done. This is the love we’re all looking for; a love that will finally fill you; a love that will order your life and make you free. Thank you, Magi, for blazing the trail. Come, let us adore Jesus, the Servant King.