

Epiphany

In his homily for Epiphany Pope Francis focusses on why the wise men came and what our faith means for us. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star in the East, and have come to worship him”. With these words, the Magi tell us the reason for their long journey: they came to worship the newborn King - to see and to worship. These two actions stand out in the Gospel account. We saw a star and we want to worship.

These men saw a star that made them set out. The discovery of something unusual in the heavens sparked a whole series of events. The star did not shine just for them, nor did they have special DNA to be able to see it. As one of the Church Fathers rightly noted, the Magi did not set out because they had seen the star, but they saw the star because they had already set out (cf. Saint John Chrysostom). Their hearts were open to the horizon and they could see what the heavens were showing them, for they were guided by an inner restlessness. They were open to something new.

A holy longing for God wells up in the heart of believers because we know that the Good News is not something in the past but of the present. A holy longing for God helps us keep alert in the face of every attempt to reduce and impoverish our life and limit our vision and hopes to the here and now. This same longing led the elderly Simeon to go up each day to the Temple, certain that his life would not end before he had held the Saviour in his arms. Longing for God draws us out of an introspective isolation, which makes us think that nothing can change. Longing for God shatters our dreary routines and impels us to make the changes we want and need. Longing for God has its roots in the past yet does not remain there: it reaches out to the future.

The Gospel invites us to contrast this with the attitude that reigned in the palace of Herod, a short distance from Bethlehem, where no one realized what was taking place. As the Magi made their way, Jerusalem slept. Herod and his court had lost any real expectation that God would intervene or that things could be different. Instead they were concerned to make the most of the present and safeguard their own positions. The arrival of the wise men and their enquiries brought not joy but consternation. Gold and precious spices were the traditional offerings as a sign of tribute but they were not destined for Herod – no, they were for this unknown newborn child! It was a challenge! Herod was bewildered, afraid. It is the bewilderment which, when faced with the newness that revolutionizes history, closes in on itself and its own achievements, its knowledge, its successes. The bewilderment of one who sits on top his wealth yet cannot see beyond it. The bewilderment lodged in the hearts of those who want to control everything and everyone. A bewilderment born of fear and foreboding before anything that challenges us, calls into question our certainties and our truths, our ways of clinging to the world and this life. Herod was afraid, and that fear led him to seek security in crime: “You kill the little ones in their bodies, because fear is killing you in your heart” (Saint Quodvultdeus, *Sermon 2 on the Creed*: PL 40, 655).

Herod is unable to worship because he could not or would not change his own way of looking at things. We are here because we feel in our hearts a longing for God however confused we may be as to what this means. In its origin the word ‘worship’ means to give something or someone their due – to – recognise their worth. The wise men came from the East to worship, and they came to do so in the place befitting a king: a palace. Their quest led them there, for it was fitting that a king should be born in a palace, amid a court and all his subjects. But they knew this was not the place. No doubt what they found in Bethlehem was not what they expected but they came with open minds and hearts. Here something new was taking place. The Magi were able to worship, because they had the courage to set out. And as they fell to their knees before the small, poor and vulnerable Infant, the unexpected and unknown Child of Bethlehem, they discovered the glory of God.