

A Message for All

a prophecy that is fulfilled in the Church's history, when the Gospel will reach all peoples...

From Christmas to Epiphany, from presence to manifestation: this is the movement that the Church's liturgy causes us to carry out. In Bethlehem Jesus was born of Mary, the woman of Nazareth married to Joseph, the poor daughter of Israel, and the shepherds who hastened there at the word addressed to them by the angel saw "a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:7.12.16). Yes, Jesus, the Savior, the Lord Christ, is now a presence in the midst of his people: born in Bethlehem, the city of David, he is David's descendant who has the title of Messiah, the King of the Jews! It is the Gospel according to Matthew, which is so rooted in the Jewish milieu, that makes it clear that indeed Jesus is a Jew, he is the one who fulfills the promise made to Abraham, but he is also meant for all mankind, hence meant to be revealed to the nations, to the *gojim*, the pagans.

We know well the Gospel story (contained only in the Gospel of Matthew: Mt 2:1–2), which has always been prominently present in the Christian spiritual and liturgical tradition and capable of astounding ever anew the hearts of believers. From the East, the land of wisdom of the peoples, some wise men (their number is not given nor is it said that they were kings) come to Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews, almost as if in pilgrimage. They do not belong among Abraham's descendants, they are not heirs to the promise, they do not know the true and living God, they are not circumcised, hence are not within the covenant that has for its sign the incision in the flesh; they therefore are not guided on their journey by God's word. But their search for God, their struggle against idolatry, their thinking, meditating, scrutinizing nature gives them the possibility of reading it in a visionary mode, which leads them to follow the sign perceived in the light of a star. Even a star can indicate a way... Obedient to the knowledge born of their search, they come to Jerusalem, ready to interrogate the wisdom of Israel, revealed wisdom, to have their expectation fulfilled. The high priests and the scribes, depositories of the ability and the mission to interpret the prophecies, answer, truly, infallibly, although they themselves remain in the dark, blind before the accomplishment of the Messianic event, disturbed and blinded like Herod.

The Scriptures testify that the King of the Jews is to be born in Bethlehem, and the Magi, always obedient, now not only to their human seeking, but to Israel's Scriptures, arrive at the house where, when they entered, "they saw the child with Mary, its mother" (Mt 2:11). They too, like the shepherds, see a human and poor reality. But this reality is revelation, it is manifestation, it is epiphany that calls forth adoration and offering. This epiphany, which through the Magi reaches the pagan nations, repeats and does not annul the fact that Israel is the first-born, to whom belong "the quality of sons, the glory, the covenants,... the promises, and above all, the coming of the Messiah" (cf. Rm 9:4–5), but it also makes clear that this child is destined as blessing for all peoples, for all mankind. The universality of the good news is at once affirmed, already at the moment of Jesus' birth, and the episode of the Magi appears as a prophecy that is fulfilled in the Church's history, when the Gospel will reach all peoples, all the cultures of the world. All cultures and traditions of the peoples carry disseminated in them signs, traces of God's Word: they are the "seeds" of the word. In them are present the breathings of the Holy Spirit, which have guided men on their journeys of struggle against idolatry, intent on the search for meaning. Man, in fact, is characterized by a substantial identity in all places, all times, and all cultures, and he always carries in him the image of God, which can never be denied or annulled.

Epiphany, then, is the commemoration that Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God and son of man, is meant for all mankind and that mankind is able to recognize him and so to participate in Abraham's inheritance: the blessing of God. In Epiphany, however, there is also a warning for Christians: one can know the Word, be even delegated to interpret it, yet remain in blindness when one harbors self-sufficiency, a contempt of others, of non-Christians, and when one does not want to be open to hearing others. We can be quite expert in guarding the treasure of Sacred Scripture, we can be jealous of our certainty of belief and at the same time not recognize that God is at work in our today. Yes, at times strangers, the "others", take our place in carrying out God's will!