



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, January 12, 2003
The First Sunday after the Epiphany

*Epiphany Procession
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

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THE KINGDOM OF TRUTH

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The word Epiphany means manifestation, in the case of today's beautiful festival it means the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, the peoples of the earth, represented by the Magi, the three Wise Men. The Church has a two thousand year old tradition of reflection upon the Epiphany; for example, listen to three sentences from a sermon on this feast in the year 461 by Saint Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome:

"Let the full number of the nations now take their place in the family of the patriarchs. Let the children of the promise now receive the blessing of the seed of Abraham. In the persons of the Magi let all people adore the Creator of the universe; let God be known, and not in Judea only, but in the whole world..."¹

Great Christian thinkers from Leo to T.S. Eliot have written down their meditations on the Epiphany. This morning let me review a few of the themes that inspire, using Saint Matthew's account which is the basis of our liturgy.

Matthew tells us that Magi, king-sages or priest-kings, from the east followed the star to the Holy Land and then, after a fateful meeting with King Herod, to Bethlehem. Tradition gives us three sages, Wise Men, because they present three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, and has given them names, Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

The Adoration of Christ by the Magi quickly became one of the most popular subjects of Christian art, as early as the second century, and before long artists made the sages racially representative in their pilgrimage to and worship of Jesus. Just this past week while on a post-Christmas break in Spain, Nancy and I saw this very representation enthusiastically acted out on Twelfth Night – the eve of the actual feast day of Epiphany by Los Tres Reyes, in which Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, arriving at Christ's manger in Cadiz, made speeches of good will and blessing to assembled townsfolk, having thrown out presents of candy to all the children on their way.

The Magi not only personify the peoples of the earth coming to Christ; they use the arts and sciences of the Gentiles to get there. Nature, embodied in the star, leads them. Christ told Saint

¹ J. Robert Wright, *Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church*, p. 46.

Thomas the Apostle he is the way, the truth, and the life. Christ told Pilate that he was born and came into this world to bear witness to the truth. The witness of the Magi shows us that all truth, eventually, leads to Christ. "Such a long journey," observed the poet Eliot. But all truth, in all times and places, belongs to the Word of God and, in due course, bears witness to the Word of God incarnate.

The Magi's gifts were gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is a sign of royalty and power. Jesus Christ is a king, such a king and ruler as had never been seen and shall not be seen again, except when *he* comes again to judge the world. Frankincense is a sign of deity. Jesus Christ is God the Son, co-eternal and co-equal with the Father, who did not count his equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself to be born and to take our nature upon him. Myrrh is a sign of death. What makes this king, this God incarnate, unique, is that he has known, from all eternity, that his sacrifice was the price he would pay for his love in creating such children as human beings with free will.

I am the way, the truth, and the life, said Jesus; no one comes to the Father but by me. The Adoration of the Magi, the Epiphany of Jesus Christ, shows us that this statement is a declaration that Christ's kingdom, the kingdom of truth and love, is universal and is no respecter of persons, of man-made boundaries and walls of hostility. "Every one who is of the truth hears my voice," said Christ before Pilate. The great teacher Saint Augustine apprehended some of this mystery -- that the "elect," the children of God, those who are "of the truth," are drawn to Christ and hear his voice no matter where they are -- when he observed that God has many souls whom the visible Church does not have and that the visible Church has many souls whom God does not have.

What if these souls, whom God has but not the visible Church, do not appear explicitly to acknowledge Jesus Christ? It is good that God is the judge, not men. But relying on the word of Christ that all who are of the truth hear his voice, we can say this: *The journey of the Magi is a journey for all souls that are "of the truth."* If they did not make it to Bethlehem to adore Christ in this life, they will see, on the other side of death, in the Judgment Day of God, that such steps as they took in the truth were leading in that direction. When they see the Judge, the Son of man, on his glorious throne, all those who are "of the truth" will recognize the destination of their life's journey, whatever they may have imagined while on the way. Jesus Christ is the King of the Kingdom of God, which is a kingdom entirely made of truth revealed in love.

That is why the Magi did not return to Herod on their way home. They had met Christ. They were warned by God in a dream about Herod, whom they had innocently asked for information. Herod, like all earthly kings (and he was an exceptionally ruthless one), was concerned about power more than truth. The Magi needed nothing to do with such concerns any longer. They went home, says Saint Matthew, by another way.

Dearly Beloved, let us follow the journey of the Magi in this as well. Our home is with Christ in God. We will not get there with the old information. We must go by another way.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.