

Si come li troi roi furent amene. deuant erode.



Behold, He appeareth, the Lord and Ruler:
& in His hand the kingdom, and power, and dominion: :

A sermon praught by Richard Major : in the church
of the Ascension & S. Agnes : at Epiphany MMX ::

PROPERS FOR

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OR MANIFESTATION OF CHRIST TO THE GENTILES

INTROIT

Malachy iii¹, Ps lxxii¹

Behold, He appeareth, the Lord and Ruler:
and in His hand the kingdom, and power, and dominion.
Give the King Thy judgments, O God:
and Thy righteousness unto the King's Son. Glory be . . . Behold,
He . . .

LESSON

Isaiah lx¹⁻⁶

Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee.
For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the
people:
but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.
And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy
rising.
Lift up thine eyes round about, and see:
all they gather themselves together, they come to thee:
thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side.
Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be
enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee,
the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee.
The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and
Ephah;
all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense;
and they shall shew forth the praises of the LORD.

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew ii¹⁻¹²

Now when JESUS was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the
king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying,
Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the
east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these

things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, *And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.* Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

OFFERTORY

Psalm lxxii¹⁰⁻¹¹

The Kings of Tharsis and of the isles shall give presents;

The Kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring gifts:

All Kings shall fall down before Him;

all nations shall do him service.



OUR BUSINESS FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES is to try not to be drunk. I mean drunk on today's feast: drunk on the overpowering *charm* of the Solemnity of the Epiphany.

It's not easy to stay sober. Our heads are turned by the sheer romance of it all. I mean by the incense, by the coffers of gold, by the caskets of fragrant myrrh, by the evil glamour of Herod, by the intoxicating wandering glory of the star. We are giddy at the spectacle of those crowned philosophers travelling out of the depths of Asia with their retinues. Their white camels, caparisoned with tapestries! Their pageboys in golden turbans! The haughty soldiers in silk tabards! The three kings themselves, suave and wise, hung with ropes of pearls!

I admit that the phrases *caparisoned camel* and *jewelled turban* don't appear in our sources. But we know from dozens of paintings and thousands of Christmas cards how exotic the Magi looked. Anyway, the words of the liturgy are quite thrilling enough. We've just heard of the *multitude of camels, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah*. In a moment the choir will sing of the *Kings of Tharsis and of the isles, the Kings of Arabia and Saba* bringing gifts. This is sensational stuff.

2. However, no date is included in the Church's kalendar *just* because it's sensational, and feeds our imagination. Every feast, every fast, preaches the Gospel to us. It tells us something we wouldn't hear if we didn't keep that feast, or observe that fast.

For a few minutes, therefore, let's clear our heads. Today we are invited, not just to luxuriate in Epiphany, but to understand it.

3. The thing to grasp is this: Epiphany isn't just the twelfth day of Christmas. Christmas and Epiphany aren't the same. I know we often get them into a happy muddle. In our nativity scenes the shepherds of Christmas night, and the three kings of Epiphany, are jumbled together. But really Epiphany is almost an anti-Christmas, just as Christmas is the anti-Epiphany. The two feasts aren't in harmony: they make one of those fine, violent contrasts of which Christianity is so fond.

4. What is the main point of the Christmas stories? That God came to us in obscurity – in almost grotesque obscurity. We miss the point of Christmas is we don't see that.

Of course we have a soft spot for the little town of Bethlelehem. But but we need to grasp how scandalously remote Bethlehem would have sounded to the first readers of the Gospels, for whom Rome was the inevitable centre

of the world. The only significance of Bethlehem for them was that Bethlehem was utterly insignificant. It was as ridiculously farflung a village as any village in the Roman Empire could be.

Bethlehem! Maybe it's significance will be clearer if we try to picture the single most farflung spot in the entire United States.

Where, precisely, *is* the most farflung spot in the United States? I spent a pleasant few minutes with an atlas last week. My researches led me to the great little hamlet of Denio Junction, Nevada, just north of the great little county town of Winnemucca.* There isn't much in Denio (population 57): just a petrol station and a couple of motels. But that's enough. Behind the Denio Junction Motel is a roomy sort of tool-shed where tools are kept. And in that shed God entered the world, nine days ago, in squalor, at midnight, almost in solitude. A few workers from a local farm turned up: no one else. The desert stars blazed away over Winnemucca County as usual. If the angels sang, the local papers did not record the fact.

That's what it was like when God came to us. The Birth could not have been more out-of-the-way and quiet. [God was "born like an outcast or even an outlaw."] The divine humility is so extreme that God choose to steal into the world, silently, secretly, unmarked.

That is the point of the Christmas stories.

5. And what is the point of the Epiphany stories?

The exact opposite. When God appeared as Man there was a political earthquake. The three wise men from the East seem intoxicatingly charming to us, but they weren't charming at the time. They represented a public crisis. They appeared in the capital announcing 'The King is born. Where is He?' *When Herod the king had heard these things, our Gospel says, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.* I should think they were troubled. Imagine the stir if, let us say, the King of Thailand, the President of Kenya and the Grand Duke of Luxemburg suddenly flew into Washington D.C. crying 'Where is the universal Emperor Who must humble every government?' – and then blew out again in the direction of Denio Junction. The stock market would plunge; Congress would hold hearings; President Obama would be briefed. Barack Obama is a delicate gentleman, and I'm sure he wouldn't deal with the threat by having the boy children of northern Nevada eliminated *en masse*. But that's what Herod did. He sent a party of his troops into Bethlehem, and the killings

*[http://maps.google.co.in/maps?](http://maps.google.co.in/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&geocode=&q=nevada&sll=21.125498,81.914063&sspn=50.867799,92.724609&ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=Nevada,+United+States&ll=41.987057,-118.65715&spn=0.163066,0.493011&t=h&z=12)

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began.

Thus the Herodian *régime* was shaken, and indeed a few years later the Romans intervened, because of this and similar atrocities, and overthrew it.

That's what it was like when God came to us. The divine Baby was troubling capital cities, provoking massacres, setting kingdoms by the ears, before He was a few weeks old.

6. So here we have our fine violent contrast. The Christmas feast carefully sets up a certain atmosphere: peace, awe, silent joy, solitude, secrecy. The feast of Epiphany comes along and knocks it to pieces. The Greek word ἐπιφάνεια means *a public manifestation*. Instead of silence and joy we have the collision of kingdoms, the turmoil of peoples, violence, intrigue: all the roar and lurid energy of human history.

And it's a fair question: Which is true, Christmas or Epiphany? How does Christ show Himself to mankind? Does He steal to us gently, privately, silently; or does He descend on us with the clamour of publicity?

7. It's a fair question, and the only fair answer is to say: Both.

Both. Christ gives Himself to us quietly, again and again. You probably know that ravishing mediaeval carol:

*He came all so still where his mother was,
As dew in April that falleth on the grass.*

*He came all so still to his mother's bower,
As dew in April that falleth on the flower.*

*[He came all so still where his mother lay,
As dew in April that falleth on the spray.]*

That is how it was when Christ appeared in Bethlehem. That is how it is when you and I call Him, and He is with us. We say our prayers, we put out our hands for the Eucharist, and there, in unspeakable tenderness and privacy, God is with us. We are alone with Jesus, and the world does not know. The silent night, holy night of Christmas is ours again and again, as long as we live.

8. But Christ's coming can not only be secret. If we think our faith is just a private matter, then we haven't understood it.

In Christ, God and Man are united. With Christ, humanity starts moving back towards unfallen perfection and obedience. The divine Baby is necessarily the King of the universe, necessarily the Master of human affairs. That's why the Magi came to Him. They were not just three eccentric foreigners with a fine command of astronomy. [Christians, who quite rightly

never stop improving their stories, decided early on that the Magi were also princes: Balthasar, a young king from Africa; Melchior, a middle-aged king from Europe; and white-haired Caspar from the Orient. Chesterton has said that it may as well have been Pythagoras, Confucius and Plato who came to Bethlehem to kneel.] The Magi are representatives: representatives of all peoples, all nations, and also of all culture. When they knelt before the Infant on His Mother's lap, they submitted the whole world to the God Who made it, and now lives in it.

That's why Epiphany was a public crisis. *Where is he that is born King? for we are come to worship Him!* cried the Magi; and Jerusalem trembled.

The Epiphany or showing-forth of Christ remains a public crisis. When Congress debates abortion: then the order and justice of Christ's kingdom struggle to be made themselves manifest in human affairs. When artists and film-makers sneer at the Christian Faith, and libel it: that is Herod fighting back about the menace of the Prince of Peace. When the news of the Incarnation is proclaimed and pagans are converted, then that is Epiphany. And it is Epiphany an awful lot just now. [

The Hebrews were a tiny nation tucked into a corner of the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, they had a unique knowledge of the one God, and cherished the hope that all nations would one day come to them, and submit to their God. We've heard that hope shouted out by Isaiah, six centuries before Christ: *The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.* We've heard those fantastic images of camels – *the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah* – processing into this tiny little hidden, secret nation. Nothing was less likely, you might say. Yet these visions came true. The kings of the world did hurry to the brightness of Christ's rising. Within a few centuries the whole Roman Empire had come and knelt before the Bethlehem Child, declaring Him to be God, acknowledging Him to be their only hope.

]Two billion people bowed before the Child born at Bethlehem this Christmas, one in three of the entire human race, and our ranks grow quickly. Demagogues in Bombay war on the Faith, as do bandits in the Sudan and tyrants in Beijing. But in statistical terms we are unstoppable: there's never been anything like it. Twenty three thousand people are converted to the Christian faith every day, mainly in Africa and Asia.** Every day 23,000 people, from nations we've scarcely heard of, do exactly what the Magi did:

** At the same time 7,600 Europeans and North America defect each day, not apostasising but simply floating off into vagueness.

they come from far away, they reach Christ and they submit.

9. Epiphany is true: Christianity is always a public matter, even a political matter. Its aim is world conquest. [Everyone always knew that. When Paul was dragged before Herod Agrippa, great-grandson of the Herod who met the Magi, Paul cried *the king knoweth of these things, ... I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner*. That's the spirit! Indeed, that's the Spirit. These things weren't done in a corner. Herod Agrippa was a smoother man than his great-grandfather: *Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian*, he told Paul with a smile.^{***} We can hear the force of history blowing through that marble hall above the Mediterranean: *almost, almost*. – Epiphany is always true. The Herods never forget.]

Christmas is [always] true: Christ steals to you privately, quietly, still as dew in April, murmuring *I am with you; love Me more, follow Me more closely*.

The same Christ Who woos you rules history. More than that: its the same universal Wisdom Who orders the movements of each electron, and sways the explosion of galaxies, *and* seeks to order the nuances of your particular life. The God within is the God without. And therefore the struggle for order within you and me is the same as the overt struggle of the Church.

10. We sometimes forget that. We sometimes evade.

On the one hand, it's sometimes more interesting to think about, say, the troubles of the Anglican Communion, than to look inward, and attend to the business of Christ knocking on the door of my mind, saying don't do that, do this – now; be merciful, be brave.

On the other hand, sometimes it's tempting to shut myself up with the Presence of Jesus and forget about the Church Militant, brawling her way through the world: the huge, bumbling, joyful, messy, triumphant Church of God.

Whenever I forget that how intimately the Faith makes demands on me, then it is time for another Christmas in my mind. The Christ Child lies sleeping in the quiet stable. It's time for me to steal back to Him, and kneel.

But whenever I forget that Christianity is a public matter, whenever I feel indifferent to the Church's blatant struggle in the world, whenever I find my faith turning precious, snobbish, solitary and aloof – well, then it is time for a new Epiphany. I am look at the newspapers and open my eyes. The Holy War rages everywhere. We are soldiers in that war, with military obligations. The Christ Child manifests Himself and defies Herod; Herod is afraid, Herod

^{***} Acts xxvi^{26, 28}

is bloody; and amidst this uproar humanity – all human learning, all human culture, all human authority – gravitates to Bethlehem, kneels down before the Lord of triumph, and swells His retinue.

To Him, therefore, the manifested Son,
with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever One God,
be glory and honour now: and in the ages of Ages.
Amen.

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1. Our title page is an illumination from the parchment Ingeborg Psalter (c. 1195), now in the Musée Condé, Chantilly. Above, the Magi chatter to Herod: a scribe points the way to Bethlehem.

2. “Like me”, says Evelyn Waugh’s St Helena, communing with the Magi, “you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way... How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by what outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts! You came at length to the final stage of your pilgrimage and the great star stood still above you. What did you do? You stopped to call on King Herod. Deadly exchange of compliments in which began that unended war of mobs and magistrates against the innocent!”

3. It’s worth noting that Macrobius, a sound pagan, wrote in the *Saturnalia* (II, iv¹¹): *Cum audisset inter pueros quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimatum iussit interfici filium quoque eius occisum, ait: Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium*, “When he [emperor Augustus] heard that among the boys in Syria under two years old whom Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered to kill, his own son was also killed, he said: it is better to be Herod’s pig, than his son.” Herod ostentatiously kept *kosher*, you see. So there’s no good reason to rule out the historicity of the Massacre.