

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

The Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord (C)

Isaiah 60.1-6

Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3.1-12

Matthew 2.1-12

Isaiah 60.1-6

1. This hymn from Isaiah is known as the “Third Song of Isaiah” or the *Surge, illuminare* (its Latin title) in the Prayer Book, where it is found (*BCP* p. 87) as Canticle 11 for use in Morning Prayer.
 - a. In its original context, the hymn refers to the establishment of a new and glorious Zion, to which all people of the world shall pay homage.
 - i. This glorious Zion is considered to be a “type” for the kingdom of heaven.
 1. A type is a prefigurement in the Old Testament for what is revealed in the New Testament.
2. The song opens with a double imperative, emphasizing that the glory of the LORD sweeps away all darkness (*cf.* Deut. 33.2; Mal. 3.19).
 - a. The word “glory” is used both as a noun and as a verb, and this entire section may be the origin of Revelation 12. (Compare also John 1.4-18.)
3. One day all nations will become God’s children through faith.
 - a. Compare Romans 4.17, and the infancy narrative at Matthew 2.1-12.
 - i. The connection with Matthew 2.1-12 was made very early in the life of the Church, and this lesson has been used in the liturgy for the Feast of the Epiphany from earliest times.

Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14

1. One of the “royal psalms,” here beginning with an extolment of the king as a provider of justice and continuing with a prayer for the long reign of the king.
 - a. Ideal kingship is an expression of the rule of God.
 - b. All nations will be subject to God’s rule.
2. Church commentators (*e.g.*, the Venerable Bede, 7th C.) have from early times linked this psalm with the rule of Christ, with some (*e.g.*, Eusebius of Caesarea and St. Athanasius, both 4th C.) considering the psalm to be a prophecy of the rule of Christ and of the calling of the Gentiles).
 - a. The psalm has, therefore, traditionally been used on Epiphany.

Ephesians 3.1-12

1. Paul addresses himself directly to the Gentiles, as interpreter of the mystery revealed to him.
 - a. Paul’s primary insight into the mystery of Christ is that the Gentiles are included in His Body; they are to be full participants in His Church.

2. The phrase in v. 2 that the addressees have already heard what is to be said may reflect prior communication with the Ephesians, or may be rhetorical only.
 - a. However, the apostle goes on to refer to what “I wrote,” and this whole phrase may refer back to the revelation of Christ discussed at 1.9 and 2.13-17.
3. The mystery of Creation is revealed in and by the Church (the “apostles”) in the present age (*i.e.*, now that the Messiah has been revealed). God’s plan includes salvation of all the world; of all peoples.
 - a. The Church is the instrument through which God’s plan is announced to “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (v.10).
 - i. These “powers” are those forces that prior to Christ’s death exercised dominion over humans (*cf.* 6.12).
 1. Christians are freed from the dominion of these powers, and thus have confidence to approach God (v. 12).

Matthew 2.1-12

1. The King Herod in the infancy narrative (Herod the Great) should not be confused with the Herod of the Passion narrative (Herod Antipas).
 - a. Herod the Great was a Roman puppet who ruled from 37 to 4 B.C. His death, therefore, coincides closely with the probable birth of Jesus.
 - i. Matthew relates Jesus’ birth to Herod’s reign to mark the event as one in history.
2. The wise men (“magi”) are thought to have been from an hereditary Persian caste of priests/astrologers, associated with the interpretation of dreams. (In effect, astrology ended when the magi first saw the Christ, for all the heavens now orbited around the Sun of Righteousness!)
 - a. Matthew does not say there were three wise men. This number became settled in tradition, in which the wise men are associated with the kings referred to in Psalm 72.
 - b. In Matthew, the magi are representatives of the Gentile world.
 - i. The term “magi” (“wise men” is too generic) suggests Persia; their practice of astrology suggests Babylon. The gifts they bring point to Arabia or the Syrian desert.
 1. Regardless, they are of a type recognized by Herod.
3. The Star of Bethlehem could have been a supernova, comet, or planetary conjunction, but may well be a “midrash” (commentary) element on Numbers 22-24 (the Balaam narrative), especially 24.17, the fourth oracle.
 - a. Rabbinic commentary (in the ancient Targums) had associated this oracle with the appearance of the Messiah.
4. The magi offer the best example of a sound Mariology in that they bow to and worship Jesus in Mary’s lap. They honor Mary but worship her Child.
 - a. The gifts are offered to the Child.
 - i. The number of the gifts gave rise to the tradition of the number of magi.
 1. The gifts they bring echo Isa. 60.6 and Ps. 72.10.

- a. The tradition that gold signifies kingship, incense divinity, and myrrh redemptive suffering is later than Matthew.