

WE CONTINUE TO BE MADE WISE THROUGH THE LORD'S MYSTERIES

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Welcome to the proclamation of the the Word of God on this third of the great feasts of the ancient Church. Today, our ears, hearts and minds are to be built up as we continue to be made wise through hearing of the Lord's Mysteries as we remember this eternally true declaration:

And they, having come into the house, they saw the Child with Mary, His mother; then, having fallen down, they worshipped Him; then, having opened their caskets, they placed gifts alongside Him: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.¹

Running through the Gospel text for Epiphany are words translated from one Greek word. While most of you are not here for a language lesson, that single Greek word has significance for the Church. It serves as an important descriptor for the actions of the faithful in the nascent Church in the house in Bethlehem. It has remained an important word, even for the Church wherever she may be found today. Whether this word's pronunciation, προσκυνεω, is the same today as it was in the first century A.D. is not really that important.

What is relevant to us today is to understand that St. Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used forms of that word to describe the intent of the Magi, the false intentions of Herod, and the actual actions of the Magi before the Child Jesus. That means that translations of the word, προσκυνεω, "I worship," showed up three times in your hearing today. For us, for you, those instances hold very important truths. They uncover one of the main reasons that God has called you here today.

That is, you are in this place, in the Presence of the Living God, to worship, to spiritually, if not physically, prostrate yourself before God with your requests, petitions, thanksgivings and prayers. Let us consider today how the Gospel of Matthew uses the concept of worship. It indicates that one of its components is bowing your face before Jesus. After all, He is He Who was, is, and ever shall be, God!

¹ Matthew 2:11.

For the purposes of today's proclamation, please understand that St. Matthew uses words formed from this eight-letter word - προσκυνεω - with respect to different people interacting with Jesus 10 times throughout his Gospel. Beyond the three times in today's reading, "to worship, to prostrate oneself" was used by the Apostle and Evangelist seven more times to describe the postures of people asking good things of Jesus.

Three times these worshippers fell down before Jesus before He bore their sins, and the sins of the whole world, into the grave and then had conquered death. The first man took the position of worship to ask for healing/cleansing (*Mt. 8:6*). A second man asked Jesus for a miracle that would resurrect that ruler's daughter from the dead (*Mt. 9:18*). A woman asked Jesus, in prostrating herself before Him, to cast out demons from her daughter (*Mt. 15:25*).

Those were good requests. Jesus, out of love for those hurt by sin in the world, had mercy on them. Cleansing, resurrection from the dead, and exorcism all came about through Jesus. That is wonderful! Those accounts give us, you, courage to petition Jesus for your needs, and to intercede for the needs of others. That is worship, spiritual prostration before Jesus as the God Who wills to work good for the faithful, for you!

Even so, we have four more times in St. Matthew's Gospel to consider people "worshipping" in the Presence of Jesus. The next two are recorded and declared to reveal that even the faithful might have times when they, like you, approach Jesus with wrong intent. The first occurs after Jesus had walked on water in a storm. Peter had tried to emulate Him, and he had begun to sink. Jesus rebuked him and the other disciples in the boat, then the wind and waves stopped. Only then, did the men "worship" Jesus as God's Son (*Mt. 14:33*). When was the last time you bowed down before God only after He had rebuked you for your unbelief?

The second occasion of people approaching Jesus with wrong intent is recorded by the Evangelist as he described that which took place as Jesus began His journey to Jerusalem to die. In that instance, a mother and her two sons – both men close disciples of Jesus – approach Jesus to ask to sit at positions of power and authority when He came into His kingdom (*Mt. 20:20*). Jesus rebuked them. He called them out of false worship – of Him – and into the true worship that is shown in bearing one’s cross and serving the neighbor in the Faith. That time, Jesus used the wrong worship of a mother and her sons to declare that He would *give His life as a ransom for many* (*Mt. 20:28b*). This record of worship is given to ask you to think of the last time when you approached Jesus in worship with a theology of glory. When have you wanted Him to give you more than the daily crosses of this life and thereby place you above your fellow disciples of Jesus?

That leaves two more instances of people practicing προσκυνεω in the Real Presence of Jesus. These two are situated after Jesus’ followers recognized Him after He was raised from the dead. The first came close in time to the women’s discovery of Jesus’ empty tomb (*Mt. 28:9*). There they fell down and clung to Him in joy. The second came shortly thereafter, when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the Eleven in Galilee (*Mt. 28:17*). Even though some had even then doubted during their worship in His Presence, Jesus handed on to them the commission to make disciples, baptizing them in the triune Name, and teaching them to observe all He had commanded (*Mt. 28:19-20*). When was the last time you recall reclining worship – in spiritual prostration – before the risen and ascended Jesus? (Think of your attitude and body language this morning during God’s absolving you of your sins).

That you are here today is proof that the Eleven were faithful. That faithfulness then went on to include those they had instructed in the Faith – those catechized down through the centuries since in the beautiful mysteries and treasures of the Faith – that they were faithful. From their faithfulness, you, and the Church into which you have

been called to worship the Lord – in prayer, with petitions, intercessions and thanksgivings – are freed to continue our Lord’s commission. You are free to open your treasure caskets of Faith’s response to the Presence of Jesus and give of yourselves to your neighbors. All of that leads us back to considering the events that moved the Magi long ago to respond with their treasures as they are recorded in the Epiphany Gospel. Pray now that we would continue to be made wise as the Lord reveals His mysteries through today’s Gospel reading. Our text begins:

Then Jesus was having been born in Bethlehem of the Judea in days of Herod the King. Behold! Magi from (the) rising of the stars arrived into Jerusalem, continually saying, “Where is the One having been birthed the King of the Jews? For we saw the star of Him in the rising of the stars and we came to give worship to Him.”²

Those opening lines place Jesus, the Son of God, born to be King of the Jews, in an historical time in an historical location. That means that this Jesus is real and could be witnessed with the human senses.

The opening chapters of Matthew’s Gospel clearly reveal that this is the God Who operates in the created universe, not just spiritually (as many religions teach of their gods) but physically. He is the God who becomes one with His creatures. He loves them so much that He sets aside His divinity for just short of four decades, that He might raise them up from their sinful state.

The opening of this day’s Gospel reveals that God knows what His creatures experience in the womb, from the instant He gives them life. The true God knows, in Himself, through direct experience, what it means to be born of woman. He knows what it means to be destined for greatness – through suffering – which began from the world’s reception His birth announcement!

Matthew says, “Behold!” Then he goes on to describe men who had traveled far, from the East of Jerusalem *to give worship to Him*. These men had likely traveled more

² Matthew 2:1-2.

than 1,100 miles across the Fertile Crescent to reach the Promised Land, in order to prostrate themselves before the God of the cosmos. The Magi, as you may recall, were men renowned in those days for their ability interpret dreams and the meanings of the movements of the stars in the heavens. What they had beheld in the wonderful star that led them on into Judea was enough to cause them to travel up to two years to reach the Holy City that day. Upon their arrival – we are given to understand that they had researched texts such as that which is contained in the Book of Numbers (24:17b). They repeatedly declared their intent – to give worship to the *One having been born the King of the Jews*.

The text declares that their repeated requests received attention throughout the whole city. They even reached the ears of King Herod, the Great. He, whose death we can accurately date to 4 B.C., was a man who was consumed with concerns about who would succeed him. He had written *at least five wills to ensure right succession*. (You might want to keep that in mind when you meet with Rev. Dr. Puls to discuss your estate plans)! Think about this:

[Herod] did not simply tear... up [those old wills] or strike through the names of heirs who angered him. The last two wills were changed because Herod had discovered plots by his sons, from his first two wives, to seize power either before or after his death. In 7 B.C., a year or so before Jesus' birth, Herod ordered sons Alexander and Aristobulus executed, likely by strangling, for attempting to become rulers before Herod died. He was a suspicious man, and knew that he had no little son to take his rule. In fact, in 4 B.C., the latest year Jesus could have been born, just five days before Herod's death, he had another son, Antipater, executed. (Morehouse 2015).

The Church does not recommend you follow Herod's example when you consider the succession of your estate upon your demise! All of that may help to make more sense of the next line of today's Gospel. The Evangelist reports of the Magi's arrival and repeated inquiries:

Hearing, the King Herod was shaken together and all Jerusalem with him.³

Herod the Great was troubled. That meant trouble for all the Jews. He was known for executing those who stirred him up. Even so, he was extremely politically astute, as the next line reminds us as it says:

And he gathered together all the High Priests and scribes of the people, continually inquiring from them where the Christ (was) to be birthed.⁴

High Priests of the Jews were appointed, at that time in history, in a manner that would ensure they could not adopt a following – one which could challenge Herod's, and ultimately, Caesar's rule. It seems he kept insisting they inform him where the King of the Jews, here called the Christ, which as you know, means Anointed One. The leaders of the Jewish people of the time gave a biblical answer to Herod's request, as our text records that *they said to him:*

"In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it stands written through the prophet:

'And you, O Bethlehem of (the) land of Judah, certainly are not least among the leaders of Judah.

For from you will come out (a) Leader Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"⁵

The answer of those religious leaders to Herod sets a good example for the Church today. That is, when you are asked about a biblical prophecy, turn to the Bible for your answers. Look, as they did, at the texts in context. Look for parallels that teach of the same thing (for there are at least four texts quoted in their answer). And, don't be surprised if those who question you about the Faith reject their Message – that Christ was born to die to bring forgiveness of sins to all people. For that is what King Herod did, as our text continues to say:

³ Matthew 2:3.

⁴ Matthew 2:4.

⁵ Matthew 2:5-6.

*Then Herod, having secretly called the Magi, [did so] to learn exactly from them the time of the appearing star. And having sent them into Bethlehem, he said: "All of you, having gone, learn exactly about the Child; and as soon as you may have found (Him), all of you must have made [it] known to me, thus I, also having come, may have worshipped Him."*⁶

To quote one of our former vicars, "Sneaky, sneaky!" Those who follow the Church calendar for your daily devotions, know that which Herod did. The Church has commemorated the Holy Innocents for centuries on December 28th. But, the Magi did not know that at the time. They just wanted to go into the Real Presence of the Lord to give worship to Him. They headed off, as our text recalls:

*And they, hearing the king, proceeded on their way; and, behold! the star which one they saw in the rising of the stars, it went before them, until coming, it stood above where the Child was; and beholding the star, they rejoiced (with) very great joy!*⁷

If you thought that this day was a rehearsal of the Church Year in the proclamation a bit earlier, the phrase, "rejoiced with very great joy," also rings out from the message of the angels to the shepherds (Christmas Midnight) to the reaction of the women as they departed Jesus' empty tomb. The Magi rejoiced for the moving star had stopped. They had finally completed their journey as it revealed to them where the Child was living in Bethlehem. Our text, however, does not stop, as it reveals the response of the Magi:

*And they, having come into the house, they saw the Child with Mary, His mother; then, having fallen down they worshipped Him; then, having opened their caskets, they placed gifts alongside Him: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*⁸

Those men, how many there were we cannot be certain. Church tradition, settled in the mid-400s, holds that there were three. The Church believed there were three because of the three gifts! By the 500s the Church agreed on the names of the wise men – Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. According to Church history in the West, that

⁶ Matthew 2:7-8.

⁷ Matthew 2:9-10.

⁸ Matthew 2:11.

which descended from Rome, there is record that the relics of the Magi have been residing since 1162 AD in the cathedral in Cologne, Germany. Three gold-crowned skulls are housed in the largest reliquary in the world, one encrusted with seven feet of gilded silver and jewels. The bones were reportedly discovered in Persia at the end of the fifth century AD.⁹ Whatever! Our text concludes:

Then, having been informed according to (a) dream not to have returned to Herod, through another way they went away (from danger) into their land.¹⁰

The Magi, having worshipped, disappear from Scripture. Herod, having been thwarted in his nefarious plans, still plots. God, in His Divine plan, spared His infant Son, that He might die the death He was destined to die before He cast down the foundation of the cosmos. The Epiphany is about Jesus, not the Magi, nor even King Herod. That you have come here to worship God in Christ, is proof enough of that! Let us then continue to receive His gifts, and respond with right worship, as we continue to be made wise through the Lord's mysteries.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Epiphany Feast (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Sunday, January 6, 2019

Pastor Michael H. Morhouse

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Soli Deo Gloria

⁹ Saunders, William. The Magi. Internet. <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0191.html> , accessed 6 January 2011.

¹⁰ *Matthew* 2:12.

And, of the Jesus having been born in Bethlehem of the Judea in days of Herod the King, Behold! Magi from (the) rising of the stars arrived into Jerusalem...¹¹

continually saying, "Where is the One having been birthed the King of the Jews? For we saw the star of Him in the rising of the stars and we came to give worship to Him."¹²

Hearing, the King Herod was shaken together and all Jerusalem with him.¹³

And he gathered together all the High Priests and scribes of the people, continually inquiring from them where the Christ (was) to be birthed.¹⁴

The ones, they said to him, "In Bethlehem of the Judea; for thus it stands written through the prophet:

'And you, O Bethlehem of (the) land of Judah, certainly not least are you in the leading ones of Judah. For from you will come out (a) leader, Who will shepherd the people of me, the Israel.'"¹⁵

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And having sent them into Bethlehem, he said: "All of you, having gone, you learn exactly about the Child; and as soon as you may have found (Him), all of you must have made known to me, thus also I, having come, I may have worshipped to Him."¹⁷

And they, hearing the king, proceeded on their way; and, behold! the star which one they saw in the rising of the stars, it went before them, until coming, it stood above where the Child was;...¹⁸

and beholding the star, they rejoiced (with) very great joy!¹⁹

And coming into the house, they saw the Child with Mary, the mother of Him; and, having fallen, they worshipped Him; then, having opened their caskets, they placed alongside Him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.²⁰

¹¹ Matthew 2:1.

¹² Matthew 2:2.

¹³ Matthew 2:3.

¹⁴ Matthew 2:4.

¹⁵ Matthew 2:5-6.

¹⁶ Matthew 2:7.

¹⁷ Matthew 2:8.

¹⁸ Matthew 2:9.

¹⁹ Matthew 2:10.

²⁰ Matthew 2:11.

Then, having been informed according to (a) dream not to have returned to Herod, through another way they went away (from danger) into the land of them.²¹

²¹ *Matthew 2:12.*