

Epiphany

Year A B C



FIRST READING
Isaiah 60:1-6

PSALM
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

SECOND READING
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

GOSPEL
Matthew 2:1-12

PRAYER

Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

O God, give your judgment
to the king;
your justice to the king's son;
That he may govern
your people with justice,
your oppressed
with right judgment,
That abundance
may flourish in his days,
great bounty,
till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
from the river
to the ends of the earth.
May the kings of Tarshish
and the islands bring tribute,
the kings of Sheba and Seba
offer gifts.
May all kings bow before him,
all nations serve him.
For he rescues the poor
when they cry out,
the oppressed
who have no one to help.
He shows pity to the needy
and the poor
and saves the lives of the poor.

Reading the Word

First Reading
Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise!
Shine, for your light has come,
the glory of the LORD
has dawned upon you.
Though darkness
covers the earth,
and thick clouds, the peoples,
Upon you the LORD will dawn,
and over you
his glory will be seen.
Nations shall walk by your light,
kings by the radiance of your
dawning.
Raise your eyes and look about;
they all gather
and come to you—
Your sons from afar,
your daughters
in the arms of their nurses.
Then you shall see
and be radiant,
your heart shall throb
and overflow.
For the riches of the sea
shall be poured out before you,

the wealth of nations
shall come to you.
Caravans of camels
shall cover you,
dromedaries of Midian
and Ephah;
All from Sheba shall come
bearing gold and frankincense,
and heralding
the praises of the LORD.

Second Reading
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

I suppose you have heard of the
stewardship of God's grace that
was given to me for your ben-
efit, namely, that the mystery
was made known to me by rev-
elation, as I have written briefly
earlier.
The mystery which was not
made known to human beings in
other generations as it has now
been revealed to his holy apos-
tles and prophets by the Spir-
it, that the Gentiles are coheirs,
members of the same body, and
copartners in the promise in
Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Gospel Matthew 2:1–12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.” After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

HEARING THE WORD

“The Feast of Inclusion”

Christmas celebrations end with the Feast of Epiphany. The word “Epiphany” means “manifestation”, and today’s feast celebrates manifestation of Christ to all nations because it focuses on the recognition of Jesus as the King by the foreign sages, called the “magi.” Yet, the three readings together highlight a different aspect of Epiphany, a message particularly relevant for those, who, like the magi, are not of the Jewish background. At the time of Jesus, the non-Jews were called “Gentiles”, the word which in Greek is the same as the word for “nations.” In today’s world almost all Christians fall into that category.

God’s covenant with Abraham marked the beginning of the people of Israel. They traced their ancestry to that ancient patriarch and perceived themselves as the members of the covenantal community which started with him. Yet God, when giving Abraham the promise of becoming a great people, anticipated that “all the families of the earth will find blessing in you” (Gen 12:3). This aspect of the promise to Abraham was understood in a number of different ways. There were many among the chosen people who thought that God’s election and blessing was exclusive-

ly theirs. At the same time, others were keenly aware that God’s promises of blessing and salvation extended to all humanity.

This second view is very evident in the work of prophet Isaiah. The author of the third part of the book demonstrates not only the awareness of the universal scope of God’s intentions, but with rejoicing he welcomes the approach of that time when all the peoples of the earth will recognise the God of Israel as the one true God. In the celebratory hymn we read today, Isaiah speaks directly to Jerusalem, God’s beloved city, about the light that shines upon it. That light symbolises God’s presence which, through the city, will radiate to the whole world. In a sweeping prophetic vision Isaiah describes the magnificent processions of “nations” from all corners of the world approaching Jerusalem, caring their wealth as offerings to God. The prophet identifies these newcomers as God’s “sons from far and daughters, in the arms of their nurses”; these are God’s people. Writing about 500 years before the birth of Christ and the rise of Christianity, Isaiah anticipated the fulfilment of God’s original intent of calling to himself all the nations, “Gentiles”, of the earth.

The beginning of the Christian Church is marked by heated arguments about who, and on what conditions, can one become a member of the new people

of God. The majority of the people at time divided the world between the “Jews” and the “Gentiles”, making various distinctions between the two. St Paul fervently upheld the view that all peoples of the earth, regardless their ethnic origin, can become members of God’s family with only one necessary requirement: faith in Jesus. His tireless and unyielding work to implement this principle earned him the name “the apostle of the Gentiles.” The Church recognised and accepted this view, although not all at the time agreed. In the second reading he, or one of his disciples responsible for writing Ephesians, supports the universal inclusion of all people among God’s children. More so, he sees the Gentiles as heirs to the promise given originally to Abraham and his progeny. He calls it “the mystery” that had not been known for generations. Paul now proclaims that this mystery has been finally made public through the Holy Spirit, communicating through apostles and prophets. They declare that, because of Jesus Christ, the time has come to abolish the old distinctions and welcome the Gentiles as full members of

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is not sameness
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it is a celebration
of diversity*

the covenantal community of God’s people. Paul spoke of this community as “the new creation” (Gal 6:15). Matthew, himself a Jewish Christian, purposefully begins his account of the mission of Jesus on earth with the story of the three sages in search of the Messiah. They are obviously Gentiles: they come from the east, and they do not know where the Messiah is to be born, something that any Jew would know from the well-known prophecy of Micah. These Gentiles are divinely guided by a star – God leads them to the place of Jesus’s birth. Upon finding the baby, the three sages

prostrate themselves before him: they recognise the divine person and honour him accordingly. The gifts offered are those appropriate for royalty. Two of these gifts, gold and frankincense, are the very same gifts which Gentiles carry to the Lord God in Isaiah’s prophecy. Matthew shows that the prophet’s vision is now fulfilled by the three Gentile sages who worship God’s Son on earth, and honour him with gifts as their King. In Jesus’s presence on earth and in the sages’ worship,

God’s original intent of making all people on earth his own is at last fulfilled.

Epiphany is the feast of inclusion. It celebrates making of the new, all-inclusive people of God. This will become a full reality in the community of believers founded by Jesus, and in the Church which will include both Jews and Gentiles, with no distinction. Those who, like King Herod jealously guarded his privilege as the monarch, or who opposed inclusion of the Gentiles among God’s people, did not understand that God’s salvific purpose extended to the entire humanity. At the beginning of history God acted exclusively for the people of Israel, but the scope of his purpose was always universal. Inclusion of the nations among God’s people was always intended, and, in Jesus, it was enacted. During the feast of Epiphany all of us who come from among “the Gentiles”, or better, “the nations”, bow down in a gesture of thanksgiving before our God, just like our three “ancestors” – the Gentile sages in Bethlehem. Doing so, we fulfil what Isaiah foresaw in a vision, and what the psalmist prayed for saying “May all the kings bow before him, and all the nations serve him.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Inclusion and exclusion are experiences that we have all had at different times in

our lives. Sometimes the exclusion can be a minor one, for example being excluded from being part of a group of friends that you want so much to belong to. Or it can be major one, such as exclusion because of one's race, class, ethnicity or gender. Whether minor or major, exclusion hurts and scars us because it is often based on factors that define who we are and are important to us. When someone or a group of people exclude us, it is as if they diminish our sense of self and dignity. Exclusion occurs in all our relationships, for instance in families there are members who are excluded from invitations or recognition because of what they have done or some other failure; in our ethnic or racial groups we exclude other ethnic groups because of a history of hostilities and prejudice; in our parishes we exclude other denominations or faiths who are different from us, and nationally our leaders choose which groups will be excluded from the country. Thus, we are often excluded or we exclude others. Differences and failure to integrate diversity is one of the reasons for the fragmentation, hatred, brokenness, wars and conflicts that are destroying our world and common humanity. Inclusion is the opposite of exclusion and we have also had experiences of inclusion where we experience the warmth of love, acceptance, hospitality, friendship and community. This experience is enhanced when it goes across divisions and hostilities, when people defy their ethnocentrism and choose to reach out across differences in friendship, hospitality and generosity. It is

wonderful to see members of different ethnic and racial groups building friendships, marriages and social networks of solidarity. The plan of God is that of inclusion and diversity, where we retain our cultures, personalities and differences while relating to those different from us and allow them to celebrate their uniqueness. Inclusion is not sameness or uniformity; it is a celebration of diversity and dignity of all human persons. It is one of the tragedies of our times that parishes reflect the divisions in their communities instead of modelling a new inclusive humanity which is at the heart of the Christmas message. Jesus died in order to break down barriers between humanity and God and between all divisions. Therefore, all parishes and communities of Jesus' disciples are called to be agents of inclusion.

PROVERB

*"Milk and honey
have different colours,
but they share
the same house peacefully."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

Reflect on your experiences of exclusion and the feelings that accompanied these experiences.

Reflect on your experiences of excluding others and identify with their feelings.

Reflect on the exclusions by the groups that you belong to (ethnic, class, gender, age and race) and the consequences of these actions for those excluded.

Response to God:

Confess the sins of exclusion by you, your group, your parish.

Pray for a new beginning where you will be a channel of inclusion.

Response to your World:

What concrete steps can you take to promote inclusion in personal, social and parish life?

Identify prejudice and discrimination that operates in your community (your group, family, parish, school). Resolve to take steps to stop such practices. Who is excluded from your group? Resolve to be inclusive and bring in those who might have been driven away.

PRAYER

Pray Jesus' prayer (Jn 17:20-23)

*My prayer is not for them alone.
I pray also for those who will
believe in me through their
message, that all of them may
be one, Father, just as you are
in me and I am in you. May they
also be in us so that the world
may believe that you have sent
me. I have given them the glo-
ry that you gave me, that they
may be one as we are one— I
in them and you in me—so that
they may be brought to com-
plete unity. Then the world will
know that you sent me and
have loved them even as you
have loved me.*