

Father O'Connor's Homily 4 January 2026
Feast of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6
Matthew 2: 1-12

We call those visitors from the East who followed a star and came to the Child Jesus in Bethlehem by different titles: the Magi, the astrologers, the wise men and the three kings. But in spite of their many titles, they came for a single purpose: to worship the Christ Child, the newborn King.

The name of today's feast is "Epiphany." It means "a manifestation," "a showing." Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Mary, manifested Himself, showed Himself, to the entire world through these non-Jewish visitors.

"The Gentiles are coheirs" with the Jews, "members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel," Paul tells us today in his letter to the Ephesians.

There are some legends about these wise men.

One says that after the star that was leading them came to rest over the place where Jesus was in Bethlehem, it then dropped into a well. And that if you have a pure heart, you can look into that well and see that star shining beneath its water.

Another gives them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar.

Still another legend claimed that there were twelve wise men. But later on, it settled upon three, although the Scriptures do not tell us how many there were. The number three is very logical since they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. And in those gifts we find a lot of symbolism.

Gold was a gift for a king. We have a practice today that, when you visit someone's home for dinner, you take a small gift with you to present to the host or hostess. In the East, if you were fortunate enough to be invited to visit the king, you would take a substantial gift to present to him. And gold was considered the most appropriate gift to give to a king.

The gift of gold was the Magi's acknowledgement that Jesus truly was a king – but a different kind than the rulers of this world. Jesus did not rule by fear but by love. He did not reign from an earthly throne but from the throne of His cross. And we need to submit to His kingship.

There is a story from years ago about Lord Nelson in the British Navy. He was known to be kind and gracious when other military officers came to him to

surrender. One day an enemy admiral boarded Lord Nelson's ship to surrender and approached Lord Nelson with an outstretched hand. And Lord Nelson, with his arms at his side, said to him: "First your sword and then your hand." He needed to submit.

Christ our King was born for us, making us a part of His family. But first we must submit to His kingship. And so gold was the first gift of the Magi to Christ the newborn King.

The gift of frankincense was for a priest. In temple worship, incense was used as a sign of our prayers rising before God with a pleasing fragrance.

The Latin word for high priest is "pontifex," which means "a bridge builder." Jesus our Priest – as true God and true man – is the bridge between God and the human race. Jesus, as the Son of God, makes God available to us and Jesus, as the Son of Mary, takes our prayers to God. And so frankincense was the second gift of the Magi to Christ the Priest.

The gift of myrrh was for someone who was going to die. In those days, a body was prepared for burial with a spice called myrrh. It was an early form of embalming. This gift of myrrh was a sign that Christ, the newborn King and Priest, was also our Saving Victim who would one day die on the cross for the sins of the world.

There is a painting ["The Shadow of Death"] by William Holman Hunt [1827-1910] that portrays Jesus in His teenage years. He is working hard in the carpenter shop late one afternoon and is tired. So He goes to the doorway and stretches out His arms. And the sunlight comes through the door and casts a shadow on the back wall of the carpenter shop.

In the background is Mary who sees the shadow of the cross on that back wall and her face registers sorrow because she catches a glimpse of what will happen to her Son one day. He – our King and our Priest and our Saving Victim – will die on the cross for our sins so that we can live with Him forever.

The gifts of the Magi are full of meaning: gold for a King, frankincense for a Priest, and myrrh for someone who would die as our Saving Victim. This feast of the Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the world: to Jew and Gentile alike.

And so the response to Psalm 72 that we sang today after the first reading continues to ring true down to our own day: "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you." And so we are fittingly doing at this very moment, during this Mass.