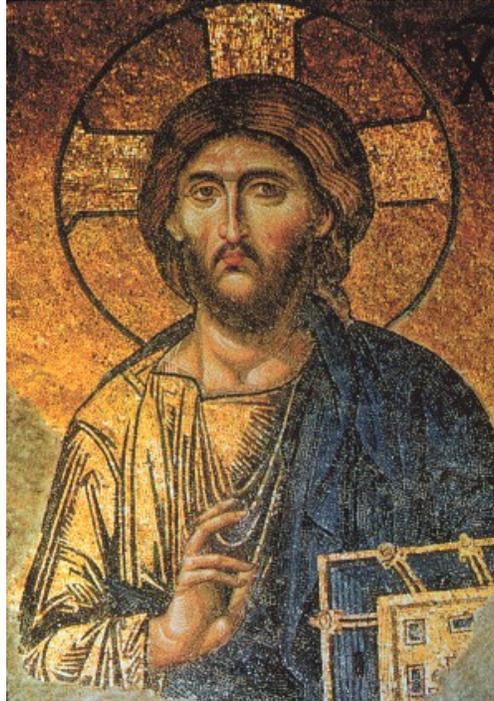


Reflections on the Epiphany January 6, 2019



“... the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them....”

Matthew 2, 9

First Reading: Isaiah 60: 1-6

Psalm: Psalm 72

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

Gospel: Matthew 2: 1-12

Introduction

Our Gospel today is rich with “echoes” of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the “infancy narratives” are full of images and insights from the Old Testament. We heard several of these echoes in the Isaiah reading and in the psalm this morning. Both are pointing to the “newness” that God is doing for the people of faith as God leads them through hardships and exile into a new radiance of justice and peace acknowledged by all of the nations.

Story of Balaam and Star of David

One other story from the Hebrew Scriptures that Matthew is very mindful of as he writes about Jesus today is the story of Balaam. This story appears in the Book of Numbers that was written around the time that the Davidic dynasty begins. It is a story about Moses and the Hebrew people coming into the “Promised Land” after traveling from Egypt through the desert. They encounter a cruel king, King Malak of the Moabites, who wants to prevent them from entering his territory. He sends for a “magus,” a “seer,” a magician or astrologer, to come from the East and curse Moses and the Hebrew people as they try to enter this new land. Balaam is this seer, and he comes to do as King Malak hopes. Balaam goes up on a ridge to look out over the Israelites, and in that moment he is taken by what he sees. He has a vision of the Hebrews prospering and bringing forth a great leader, and so he blesses Moses and the people.

The passage is quite striking

“There shall come a man out of Israel’s seed, and he shall rule many nations I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not close: a star shall rise from Jacob, and a man (a leader) shall come forth from Israel.” [Numbers 24: 7, 17, partially from the Greek Septuagint: LXX]

This would have first referred initially to David, the new king of Israel; and we can see in this passage the connection of the “Star of David” which has become the symbol of the nation of Israel in our times. As the Hebrew people underwent losses and exile, this passage came to be seen as pointing to the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, yet to come to lead and shepherd the people.

Jesus as the Son of God

Another insight that will help us appreciate the Gospel story today is that the preaching of the salvific action of Jesus as the Son of God began with the early preaching of his passion, death, and resurrection. In these early efforts of preaching about Jesus, the resurrection was seen as the place where God makes manifest that Jesus is God’s own son. Jesus wears his divinity so subtly that the early disciples don’t really “get” that Jesus is the Son of God until he rises from the dead, and so this is how their preaching about him begins.

Then as their preaching begins to speak about his “sayings and actions,” his time of ministry, the disciples begin to see the salvific continuity of his being the Son of God here too. And so Jesus’ “Christological identity” (Jesus as the Son of God) is emphasized by Mark in the first written Gospel as being revealed at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan.

As the disciples’ reflection about Jesus develops even more fully and their understanding of his identity and the reality of who he is deepens, they see

Jesus being the Son of God from his conception. Matthew and Luke want to help the believing community to see this reality of Jesus, and so they offer us the beautiful stories in their infancy narratives.

The Gospel writers are expressing the development of a reality (Jesus as Son of God) that is already there but is now more completely understood by the faith community. They are not creating a Christology *ex nihilo*. [See Raymond E. Brown, An Adult Christ at Christmas, pp. 7-8.]

Gospel Story of the Magi

So today we have the story of the Magi coming to adore and visit the Child Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, and we really have the "Gospel in miniature" as scholars say. I know I love these Gospel stories in Christmas time, and I imagine many of you do also. They hold the heart of our beliefs about Jesus especially, and they are wondrous to ponder and reflect upon. We see in them truths about Jesus as the adult Christ which the early community of believers experienced and now trust were there in the Christ Child.

We see these astronomers attentiveness to something marvelous happening in Nature, the "star at its rising," which points to a new king. They follow their insights and learnings from Nature, and it brings them to Jerusalem and the People of Israel. The People of Israel have been given the encounter with God and God's on-going revelation, and they also have written about their encounters with God through their Scriptures which reveal God's drawing close to us. The Hebrew Scriptures also speak about the Messiah-to-come, and this confirms the Magi's study and journey toward the new-born king.

Nature and Faith

This is the bringing together of Nature and Faith, and the Magi's joy increases as they approach Bethlehem guided once again by the star. They encounter the Mother and Child and experience the closeness of God, of God's own Son, in our own humanity!

And the responses to this miracle here foretells the similar responses when Jesus is an adult. Sadly here, and with Jesus as an adult, his own people do not "see" him or accept him. Herod and the Jewish leaders do not search for him nor receive him; but the Gentiles, the Magi, who are outside the Jewish community, rejoice in Jesus, acknowledge him, and receive him as the the Christ and the Son of God!

Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

The Magi's gifts acknowledge Jesus' true identity. **Gold** is for a king and noble one. **Frankincense** is for worship, prayer, and to acknowledge his divinity; and **myrrh** is for his self-sacrificial death and his suffering for his people. One of the uses of myrrh is to anoint the body of those who are dead.

Here then we see the Gospel story of Jesus in “miniature.” The whole Gospel message is here in these infancy narratives, and this is why they are so dear to us. They are part of the progressive reflection and understanding of the **meaning of Jesus** and his humanity and divinity!

Following the Light of the Star: Hope

When I reflected on this Gospel story, what stood out for me was the “starlight” that the Magi followed. It was likely a small light in the midst of the darkness and breadth of the sky, and yet they followed it. Am I ... or are we ... willing to follow the light of Christ’s hope in the midst of the darkness of our personal lives at times, or the darkness in our families, or in our country or in the world?

We are invited once again today at this Eucharist to trust the “light of Jesus the Christ” in all the circumstances of our lives. The Gospel story today encourages us to know that we will meet the Christ as we make our journeys to him, and his light is stronger than any darkness we may experience. This is our hope: that we too will meet Christ face to face and in our own flesh and blood. This too is the reality and joy of our sharing in his Body and Blood today in the Eucharist.

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