

Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord

'And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshiped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.'

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The beginning and the end meet in the same place. And to be a Jew begins with an answer to a simple question: *'Before you lies the way of life, and the way of death.'* *'Choose ye which way you will take.'* *'Choose life.'*

To be a Jew, a follower of God, is to choose *'the way of life.'*

It is Epiphany, the day of the revelation of the Jewish Messiah to the gentiles; and there came from the east *'wise men to Jerusalem, saying, where is he that is born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.'*

'And When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.'

'Then Herod asked the wise men in secret, and inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared, and he sent them to Bethlehem and said: "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also."'

Who knows what Herod's intentions were. Perhaps he truly did want to meet the Christ child, who was surely too young at this age to depose him from his throne. Perhaps he was, even then, taken by fear that his dynasty was at its end now that a new potential king was in play, a fear that we know, in the end, would cause

Herod to demand of his soldiers the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. What we do know is that, regardless, why, he was troubled, manic, *and all Judea with him*, not knowing if this child was an usurper or a deliverer.

It is Epiphany, the day of the revelation of the Jewish Messiah to the gentiles; *'And when the wise men departed; lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshiped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.'*

We do not know why the wise men came to Christ. We do not know what compelled them to leave their homeland to seek a foreign child. We do not know why they rejoiced upon meeting him. What we do know is that they were, indeed wise, for they worshiped him, the little Lord Jesus, and offered him gifts.

They offered him gold. For Gold was the proper tribute given to kings, and therefore was most properly given to this child, the king of all creation.

They offered him incense. For incense was burnt whensoever one beckoned and beseeched a higher power to make intercession and supplication of their behalf. Incense was burnt whenever a priest would pray and intercede on behalf of his people in their sin.

They offered him myrrh, for with myrrh were the dead prepared for burial, that their body would not putrefy, would not rot, but would be preserved. Myrrh, since it preserved the body from decay, was a symbol of our ultimate resistance against the fear of death.

Now the wise men have demonstrated their wisdom, for they have offered gifts: *'gold, frankincense, and myrrh.'* In each they make a confession. Gold, for Christ is king. Incense, for Christ is the interceding priest before God. Myrrh, for Christ is the conquest of death.

To be a Jew, a follower of God, is to *'choose the way of life.'* A way prophesied of old by the seers of God. A way of promise: For long ago it was declared of Isaiah: *'He will swallow up death in victory forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces [...] for the LORD hath spoken it.'*

And again the same prophet proclaims: *'Thus saith the LORD: Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream [...] And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, shall all flesh, come to worship before me, saith the LORD.'*

'And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising; all they shall come, they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth praises of the Lord.'

So these Gentiles we call kings by Church Tradition, though the Gospels never declare them so; though they may have no realms or empires or kingdoms, we call them kings, for in coming to Christ, they have found their king, and in presenting him gifts of honor, gifts of supplication, and gifts of the promise of life over death, they have become kings over death himself, they have become rulers over death, and have become followers of life.

So *'they rejoiced with an exceeding great joy.'* For they had seen with their own eyes, and worshiped with their own tears the end of the fear of death.

To be a Jew, a follower of God, is to *'choose the way of life.'* So it is written: *'They, the magi, departed into their own country by another way.'* No longer following the way of death, but the *way of life.'*

For Christ is *'the way, the truth, and the life.'* For *'In him was life.'* *'And this is eternal life, that they may know God, and Jesus Christ, whom God has sent.'* Therefore, *'they departed into their own country by another way.'* *'The way of life'* *'Followers of God.'*

It is Epiphany, the revelation of the Jewish Messiah to the gentiles. We hear the word 'Epiphany' and we think of a sudden revelation of some truth, a realization. And now, in this, the feast of the Epiphany, the realization of Christ's entire redemptive work has been made known. The revelation of his passion and our atonement has been proclaimed in the gifts of the magi.

In that time also, the time of our Lord's suffering, the governing authorities, the Pharisees and governors were too *'troubled, and all of Jerusalem with them.'*

For in gold is found kingship. And what was written three times upon the wood of

Christ's all redeeming cross? *'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'* And the gentile Pilate wrote such words with authority, for when rebuked, he himself responded with divine derision: *'What I have written, I have written.'*

For in incense is found intercession on behalf of sinful and lawless people. And what did Christ declare from the cross to his Father in heaven? *'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'*

For in myrrh, we find not only death, but the ultimate rebuke of death, for it is once written of Christ's death: *'And Pilate gave them leave [...] to take the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought with him myrrh, about a hundred pound in weight.'* But elsewhere Christ speaks of his own death *'Destroy this temple, and I will build it again in three days.'*

And having rebuked his own murder, *he ascended into heaven. 'And he sat upon the throne and said: "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. [...]Behold, I make all things new.'*

'And when they saw the star, the magi rejoiced with exceeding great joy.' How could they not?

It is Epiphany, the revelation of the Jewish Messiah to the gentiles. To be a gentile is to *follow the way of death.*

To be Jew, and receive the Jewish Messiah, the Christ, is to *'choose the way of life.'*

A table lies prepared for us. A table which *makes all things new.* The table of a king whose rule makes straight

all the crookedness of human evil. A table which makes atonement for all our sin. A table which makes immortality within our mortal and dying bodies. Now you have completed your journey with the wise men, and have come to the humble table of the child Lord. And when you have partaken of the Holy Elements, the bread and wine made body and blood, the body and blood shown deathless and redeeming. *'Rejoice with exceeding great joy.'*

And when you leave this humble and leaking sanctuary, to go to your home,

in whatever town or place, let it be said of you and your family:

'They departed into their own country by another way.'

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*Preached by Pastor
Fields*

*Sermon Texts: Isaiah
60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12.*