

## GOSPEL

*Matthew 2:1-12*

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. ‘Where is the infant king of the Jews?’ they asked. ‘We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.’ When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ‘At Bethlehem in Judaea,’ they told him, ‘for this is what the prophet wrote:

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,  
for out of you will come a leader  
who will shepherd my people Israel.’

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. ‘Go and find out all about the child,’ he said ‘and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.’ Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

## HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

*6 January 2014*

“*Lumen requirunt lumine*”. These evocative words from a liturgical hymn for the Epiphany speak of the experience of the Magi: following a light, they were searching for *the* Light. The star appearing in the sky kindled in their minds and in their hearts a light that moved them to seek the great Light of Christ. The Magi followed faithfully that light which filled their hearts, and they encountered the Lord.

The destiny of every person is symbolized in this journey of the Magi of the East: our life is a journey, illuminated by the lights which brighten our way, to find the fullness of truth and love which we Christians recognize in Jesus, the Light of the World. Like the Magi, every person has two great “books” which provide the signs to guide this pilgrimage: the book of creation and the book of sacred Scripture. What is important is that we be attentive, alert, and listen to God who speaks to us, who always speaks to us. As the Psalm says in referring to the Law of the Lord: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (*Ps 119:105*). Listening to the Gospel, reading it, meditating on it and making it our spiritual nourishment especially allows us to encounter the living Jesus, to experience him and his love.

The first reading echoes, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, the call of God to Jerusalem: “Arise, shine!” (*Is 60:1*). Jerusalem is called to be the city of light which reflects God’s light to the world and helps humanity to walk in his ways. This is the vocation and the mission of the People of God in the world. But Jerusalem can fail to respond to this call of the Lord. The Gospel tells us that the Magi, when they arrived in Jerusalem, lost sight of the star for a time. They no longer saw it. Its light was particularly absent from the palace of King Herod: his dwelling was gloomy, filled with darkness, suspicion, fear, envy. Herod, in fact, proved himself distrustful and preoccupied with the birth of a frail Child whom he thought of as a rival. In reality Jesus came not to overthrow him, a wretched puppet, but to overthrow the Prince of this world! Nonetheless, the king and his counsellors sensed that the foundations of their power were crumbling. They feared that the rules of the game were being turned upside down, that appearances were being unmasked. A whole world built on power, on success, possessions and corruption was being thrown into crisis by a child! Herod went so far as to kill the children. As Saint Quodvultdeus writes, “You destroy those who are tiny in body because fear is destroying your heart” (*Sermo 2 de Symbolo: PL 40, 655*). This was in fact the case: Herod was fearful and on account of this fear, he became insane.

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The Magi were able to overcome that dangerous moment of darkness before Herod, because they believed the Scriptures, the words of the prophets which indicated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. And so they fled the darkness and dreariness of the night of the world. They resumed their journey towards Bethlehem and there they once more saw the star, and the gospel tells us that they experienced “a great joy” (Mt 2:10). The very star which could not be seen in that dark, worldly palace.

One aspect of the light which guides us on the journey of faith is holy “cunning”. This holy “cunning” is also a virtue. It consists of a spiritual shrewdness which enables us to recognize danger and avoid it. The Magi used this light of “cunning” when, on the way back, they decided not to pass by the gloomy palace of Herod, but to take another route. These wise men from the East teach us how not to fall into the snares of darkness and how to defend ourselves from the shadows which seek to envelop our life. By this holy “cunning”, the Magi guarded the faith. We too need to guard the faith, guard it from darkness. Many times, however, it is a darkness under the guise of light. This is because the devil, as saint Paul, says, disguises himself at times as an angel of light. And this is where a holy “cunning” is necessary in order to protect the faith, guarding it from those alarmist voices that exclaim: “Listen, today we must do this, or that...”. Faith though, is a grace, it is a gift. We are entrusted with the task of guarding it, by means of

this holy “cunning” and by prayer, love, charity. We need to welcome the light of God into our hearts and, at the same time, to cultivate that spiritual cunning which is able to combine simplicity with astuteness, as Jesus told his disciples: “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16).

On the feast of the Epiphany, as we recall Jesus’ manifestation to humanity in the face of a Child, may we sense the Magi at our side, as wise companions on the way. Their example helps us to lift our gaze towards the star and to follow the great desires of our heart. They teach us not to be content with a life of mediocrity, of “playing it safe”, but to let ourselves be attracted always by what is good, true and beautiful... by God, who is all of this, and so much more! And they teach us not to be deceived by appearances, by what the world considers great, wise and powerful. We must not stop at that. It is necessary to guard the faith. Today this is of vital importance: to keep the faith. We must press on further, beyond the darkness, beyond the voices that raise alarm, beyond worldliness, beyond so many forms of modernity that exist today. We must press on towards Bethlehem, where, in the simplicity of a dwelling on the outskirts, beside a mother and father full of love and of faith, there shines forth the Sun from on high, the King of the universe. By the example of the Magi, with our little lights, may we seek the Light and keep the faith. May it be so.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



**Head:** What strikes you about the importance of Holy Cunning as described by Pope Francis?



**Heart:** Fear of being rivalled and losing power drove Herod mad. What do you fear and how might you allow God to transform those fears?



**Hands:** How do you try to guard your faith against the deceptions and falsehoods that abound in our world?

## PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the ‘Glory Be’.