

Homily for the Epiphany of the Lord

January 4, 2026

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6 (They shall come bearing gold and frankincense.)

Responsory: Psalm 72 (Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.)

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 (The Gentiles are coheirs of the promise in Christ Jesus.)

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12 (The visit of the Magi.)

On this great Feast of the Epiphany, we have dutifully followed the ancient Christian custom of adding three Wise Men to our manger scene (along with their camel), thus ignoring the actual text of Matthew's Gospel in order to insert these beloved characters into the *more familiar story* of Jesus' birth found in the Gospel of Luke. The whole manger scene is based on Luke's account, in which Joseph and Mary live in *Nazareth*, and Mary gives birth to Jesus during their brief stay in Bethlehem to register for the census. The Gospel of Matthew, on the other hand, tells a *completely different story*. Joseph and Mary live in *Bethlehem*, not Nazareth. There is no need for Jesus to be born in a stable and laid in a manger, because the Holy Family is living *in their own house in Bethlehem!* That's where the Magi come to see Jesus, *nearly two years later!* So, according to Matthew's account, when the Magi arrive, Jesus is a toddler living at home, not a newborn baby lying in a manger.

Despite these glaring contradictions, the two nativity stories share a common theological purpose. Matthew and Luke both portray the birth of Christ as a great "epiphany," a sign that God has visited his people to save them. The revelation is manifested in different ways, but for the same reason. Luke tells of an *angel* appearing to the shepherds out in the field and announcing the good news that a Savior has been born for them. Matthew says that the appearance of a new *star* alerted the Magi that a great king had been born somewhere in the land of Judea. So, why not have everybody come together in the same manger scene? *Both stories* are about God revealing himself and his intentions for the human race. The *difference* between the two versions lies in which group of people each evangelist sees as most in danger of being *excluded* from Jesus' saving mission: the poor and marginalized, or those who do not belong to the Jewish faith.

Luke's version of events, in which Jesus is born into abject poverty, conveys the very important theological truth that salvation through Christ is available to people at *all levels of society*, from the least to the greatest. Even as Jesus was being acclaimed as a great healer, miracle worker, teacher, prophet and Messiah, he always identified with the *poor* and the afflicted – the ones whom others overlook and ignore. He even died like one of them, hanging on a cross between two common thieves. If *the shepherds* heard the Good News, then the promise of salvation must be for *everybody*.

Matthew's story about the Magi from the East highlights another type of division – not between rich and poor, but between *Jews and Gentiles*. Matthew wants to show that Christ came to save not just the Jews, who awaited the coming of their Messiah, but people of all nations and cultures around the world. As St. Paul says to the Ephesians: "It has now been

revealed... that *the Gentiles are coheirs*, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus." In fact, history shows that Christianity spread to all corners of the world not because Jews recognized Jesus as their Savior, but because *Gentiles* did. That historical fact is suggested in Matthew's story by Jesus being born quietly at home in Bethlehem, with no one taking any notice of him until three strangers from a distant land show up at the royal court in Jerusalem. Naturally, King Herod and all of Jerusalem are "greatly troubled" that *their Messiah* has been living among them for quite a while, yet these *pagans* knew about him before any of his own people!

In reality, *all four gospels* suggest that Jesus lived in obscurity until his baptism as an adult, at about age 30. *Nobody* took any notice of his birth. Only after Jesus began to work miracles and preach with unmatched authority did anyone suspect that he was more than just the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. But astonishment at Jesus grew rapidly, as he demonstrated by *many* signs and wonders that he was the Messiah. These signs were the true "epiphanies," the manifestations of Jesus' divinity, which caused many to believe in him. Hence, the epiphany stories at the beginning of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels are not describing *actual historical events* from the time of Jesus' birth or shortly thereafter. Rather, they are showing what his birth *meant* to a world shrouded in darkness, awaiting a Savior. They express *our belief* that this child, born in obscurity, has become a light to all the nations of the world and a beacon of hope for the rich and the poor alike.

In today's first reading, Isaiah prophesied that nations and kings would walk by the shining radiance of God's people. He spoke of foreigners from distant lands coming to Jerusalem to offer symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense to the Jewish leader, for he would be both a King and a High Priest for his people. However, the way that God's plan unfolded was not exactly as the Prophet described. Isaiah thought that people from many nations would see the marvels that the Lord had done for the Jewish people, especially bringing them back from exile. Seeing this "sign," foreigners would come streaming to Jerusalem to do homage to the Savior who had accomplished such wondrous deeds. It's not at all clear, though, whether these Gentiles would be able to *share* in the salvation of the Chosen People, unless perhaps, they converted to Judaism.

Matthew's story of the Magi adopts some of Isaiah's imagery, but his message is far more profound and expansive. The key difference can be seen in the gifts of the Magi. The first two gifts, gold and frankincense, are the same ones that Isaiah mentioned, and they appear to have the same symbolic meaning. They're offered to *Jesus* to honor him as a King and High Priest, who will rule over and sanctify his people. However, the third gift, myrrh, gives new meaning to the other two, for it was used to prepare dead bodies for burial. Hence, the three gifts of the Magi, *taken together*, symbolize how Jesus assumed his royal power and offered the one perfect sacrifice to his heavenly Father by *dying* on the cross. Hence, Matthew is showing us that Christ's *death and resurrection*, not his birth, have brought salvation to all who believe in him, *whether Jew or Gentile*.

So, the next time you rearrange your manger scene to make room for those Magi, remember that they represent people from all nations, all cultures, and all generations who have "found" *the crucified and risen Christ* and the salvation that he offers to us all.