

LUMEN GENTIUM

(A Reflection for Epiphany Sunday by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA, 03.01.21)

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany of Christ. The term Epiphany is from the Greek, *epiphaneia* meaning “manifestation.” In the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox or Greek rites, this feast is celebrated on 19th January and commemorates the manifestation of Christ’s divine nature as revealed during Christ’s baptism at the Jordan River and during his first miracle at the wedding Feast of Cana in Galilee.

In the Western or Latin rite, however, the feast is celebrated on 6th January or the Sunday occurring between 2nd and 8th January, primarily commemorating the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, thus showing Christ as a Universal Saviour: not only the Jewish Messiah but also the Light of all nations, hence, the theme for our reflection today is, LUMEN GENTIUM, a Latin expression which means LIGHT OF THE NATIONS, used also as the title of the 2nd Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the nature and mission of the Church.

In the opening lines of the constitution, the council declares that “Christ is the light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mark 16:15), to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church” (*Lumen Gentium* 1). These words aptly capture the Spirit of the feast of the Epiphany of Christ which we celebrate today.

In the 1st Reading (Isaiah 60:1-6), the prophet addresses Jerusalem as a royal city and Israel as a royal nation. The presence of the Lord in Zion makes this royal city radiant in a world covered by darkness; it makes this royal nation shine among peoples covered by thick clouds. In a word, Jerusalem as a city and Israel as a nation become the light of the nations of the world and a shining radiance to the kings of the earth, thanks to the presence of the Lord (vv. 1-3).

As a result, Zion will experience an influx of peoples: its sons and daughters shall be brought back from their land of captivity and foreign nations shall come to her paying homage and bringing gifts of gold and frankincense, an acknowledgment of Zion’s royal status and the fact that it reflects the glories of the Lord (vv.4-6). In this way, Deutero-Isaiah sets a universalistic outlook of Israel’s faith, making other nations sharers in the glories and radiance of its God, even as they contribute in the rebuilding of the city and the wealth of Zion.

The responsorial Psalm (72:1-13) is a prayer for the success of the king. This Psalm, alongside Psalm 127, is ascribed to king Solomon. For it reflects the kind of prayer Solomon prayed and the kinds of successes attributed to him such as judicial wisdom (1 Kings 3:16-28; cf. 2 Samuel 8:15; Jeremiah 22:15-16), the great extent of his kingdom and the gifts and tribute he received from many nations such as Tarshish and Sheba (cf. 1 Kings 5:1-3; 10:10.22). As we also read in the Psalm: “Let kings of Tarshish and the islands pay tribute, kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. Let all kings bow to him and all nations serve him” (Psalm 72:10-11).

In the 2nd Reading (Ephesians 3:2-6), Paul describes this universal perspective of salvation in Christ as a new revelation by the spirit, revealed to him as minister of grace and to the apostles and prophets. The content of this new revelation is the fact that Gentiles (non-Jewish nations) are also fellow heirs and children of God with the Jews; they are all members of one body and partakers in the promise of the Good News of Christ Jesus. In other words, in Christ, we have

been made to understand that we are all brothers and sisters (*Fratelli tutti*, as Pope Francis emphasizes).

The Gospel Reading (Matthew 2:2-12) recounts the visit of the wise men (Greek, *magi*) to the infant Jesus which is at the heart of the feast of the Epiphany. They are described as having come from the East to Jerusalem to worship the infant Jesus. For they had seen “his star” in the East. The star led them to where Christ lay with his mother Mary, and they prostrated in worship, offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

A large part of the passage (vv.3-8) is occupied with the narration of the encounter between the wise men and king Herod regarding this new born king. In this way, the Gospel presents Jesus as the true king of the Jews, in contrast with king Herod, whom the Jews may have considered illegitimate.

Worthy of note also is the fact that these wise men (Greek, *Magi*) were non-Jewish, Zoroastrian priests. They may have been regarded as Persian astrologers and foreshadow Jesus’ Gentile mission (see Matthew 28:19), a role similar to that of Tamar, Rahab and Ruth (Matthew 1:3.5) in the genealogy of Jesus (see Matthew 1:1-17).

Because of the nature of the gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) that they brought, however, later interpretations tended to consider the Magi as kings, reminiscent of the kings of Sheba and Seba who offered gifts to king Solomon, a descendant of David (see Psalm 72:10-11). In this way, Jesus, also presented as a descendant of David in the genealogy, is acknowledged by other kings of the region and is held in high esteem as the superior king, hence, paid homage just as Solomon was.

In celebrating the Epiphany, therefore, we are called upon to have a universal outlook about Christ’s nature and mission. Christ is not a saviour of only a certain privileged people, but a saviour of humanity in general. For he is the light of all nations (*Lumen Gentium*), open to all people, can illumine all people and is willing and able to save all people. May we all open up to welcome him, acknowledge him, worship him, be illumined and ultimately saved by him.