

SALT *and* LIGHT

Walking in the Shoes of the Magi

by David Gibson

Starlight guided the steps of the gift-bearing Magi “from the east,” who soon after Jesus’ birth undertook a journey that led to “the newborn king of the Jews,” enabling them to pay homage to him.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of the Magi (2:1-11). A bright star in the heavens beckoned to them. So they set out from home and traveled toward its light.

Can you envision yourself walking in the shoes of the Magi? Pope Francis believes that we all resemble the Magi in an important way.

“Following a light,” the Magi also “were searching for the Light,” the pope said in a homily for the feast of the Epiphany in 2014. Thus, “the destiny of every person is symbolized in this journey of the Magi.”

“Our life,” Pope Francis explained, “is a journey, illuminated by the lights which brighten our way.” It is a journey toward “the fullness of truth and love,” which “Christians recognize in Jesus, the light of the world.”

Sure enough, the Gospel’s Magi also differed from us, due to their habit of watching for ways the stars might influence life on earth. The *New American Bible* states plainly in a note that “Matthew’s magi are astrologers.”

The journey of the Magi led them first to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem, as one might have expected. It appears that at some point they lost sight of the star and would need to rediscover their route.

In Jerusalem they met ultimately with King Herod, who assembled the finest experts to determine where the birth of the long-awaited Messiah was expected to take place and to help the Magi find him. “In Bethlehem of Judea,” was the experts’ answer.

The Gospel soon reveals Herod’s murderous motives for helping the Magi. They will not fall into his trap, however.

“When you have found (the child), bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage,” Herod said to the Magi.

When the Magi set out again on their journey, the star reappeared and guided them. The star “that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.” The Magi “were overjoyed at seeing the star.”

They had traveled to Bethlehem from another country. But when the time came to return home they would take “another way” after being “warned in a dream not to return to Herod.”

Typically it is said that the Magi are not presented in the Gospel as Jews, though they notably longed to pay homage to the “newborn king of the Jews.” If the Gospel viewed the Magi as gentiles, meaning outsiders to Jewish faith, it nonetheless presented them as the kind of outsiders who esteemed the Jews.

Upon reaching their destination and visiting Mary and the infant Jesus, the Magi opened “their treasures” and offered fine gifts to the child.

It was a visit for the ages. For in telling how the Magi paid homage to the newborn Jesus, the Gospel strikingly revealed for Jesus’ followers in every age that



theirs is not an elite faith meant only for some. Rather, it is open to all.

On the feast of the Epiphany, late in the Church's Christmas season, the faith community retells the Gospel's brief, fascinating story of the Magi. This is an occasion during Christmastime that contemplates Christ's presence to the entire world.

The Magi who visited the newborn Jesus represent "the wider human family," they represent "all nations," Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin said in a 2006 homily. He called Epiphany "the feast of the revelation of Jesus to all peoples."

To walk in the shoes of the Magi today means journeying toward a light, Pope Francis suggested. But this journey also is devoted to "searching for the Light."

Where, though, will "the Light" be found?

Pope Francis discussed this type of human journey in a November 20 apostolic letter issued as the Church's Year of Mercy concluded. One of the ways God is encountered here and now is through the

consolation others offer to us or that we offer to them, he observed in *Mercy and Misery (Misericordia et Misera)*.

"The drying of tears," Pope Francis wrote, "is one way to break the vicious circle of solitude in which we often find ourselves trapped."

Consolation—whether in the form of "a reassuring word, an embrace that makes us feel understood, a caress that makes us feel love, a prayer that makes us stronger"—is a means of expressing "God's closeness," said Pope Francis.

In traveling "the road of mercy," he commented, one meets so many "who reach out for someone to take their hand and become a companion on the way."

In the pope's words, "Each day of our journey is marked by God's presence." He "guides" our journey's steps with grace that makes us "capable of loving"—able to extend mercy and love to others, even as we ask God to extend the same to us.

Gibson served on Catholic News Service's editorial staff for 37 years.

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