

The Reason We Follow This Star
Reflection on the Gospel– Solemnity of the Epiphany Year A
(Matthew 2:1-12)

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Epiphany is the feast of the wise ones or astrologers “from the East” who are led beyond themselves and their immediate location by the rising of a star. They form their own preliminary hypothesis and travel west to search out the meaning of this sign. They learn from the official interpreters of the Jewish scriptures, the “scribes of the people”. They then follow the star that leads them to the new born child, the incarnate Wisdom of God. The gospel does not stipulate how many wise ones or magi come to pay homage to the child. There is no indication in the story as to whether the group is all male or male and female. The three precious earth derived gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh have traditionally been associated with three different characters, usually kings of diverse nationality and colour, although there is no support for this in the text. These strangers are the first to recognise “God-with-us” in the person of the child Jesus and the first to pay him homage. They also come to recognise, in a dream, the duplicity of King Herod. They have the good sense not to accede to Herod’s request to “bring him word” of the newborn king. Heeding the warning implicit in the dream, they return home “by another road”.

The story-teller Matthew leaves room in the tableau for the insertion of the wise ones who will emerge through the ages. There is an invitation for us to enter into Matthew’s drama, to be the wise ones, to join with people of diverse cultures, to engage in our own search for Wisdom, to honour the birth and the life of every child and to follow the “star” that leads to truth and lasting peace. There is an invitation to be wary of self-serving rulers who find their positions threatened by the different sort of power that is based on vulnerability and openness to new life. There is also an invitation to ask why it is important for each one of us to follow the star that leads to truth, to life and to love.

Towards the end of World War, W.H. Auden wrote a lengthy poem, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* addressing precisely this matter. Auden’s complex engagement with the Christmas Story includes a section on the wise ones (for Auden, there are three) who have tried but failed to solve the problems of human existence with the help of science and the social sciences. The reader is told that the deeper answers they seek are to be found, not so much in the sciences, but rather in the birth of the Christ child, in the incarnation of the living God. Auden’s wise ones decide to follow the star that leads to the new-born child. The first, who has put Nature “through a thorough inquisition” declares, “To discover how to be truthful now [i]s the reason I follow this star....” The second, who has lost faith in “Time’s constant” and the “inherited self-importance” of the Present, asserts, “To discover how to be living now [i]s the reason I follow this star....” For the third, “arriving at the Greatest Good by introspection” leaves no time for the things that matter, for “affection, laughter, kisses, squeezing, smiles”. And so, “To discover how to be loving now [i]s the reason I follow this star...” says the third of the wisdom figures. The section closes with the admission that these three have only the vaguest notion of why they are what they are. Their whole journey is about discovering “how to be human now”. That is why they follow this star.

In order to discover how to be truthful now, how to be living now, how to be loving now, how to be human now! That’s why we follow the star that brings us to the embodiment of truth and life and love and ultimately to an understanding of what it means to be truly human. Auden gets to the heart of the Feast we celebrate today. While the sciences can provide some of the answers, if we want to know how to be truly human now, we are invited to follow the one whom we believe to be both fully human and fully divine.