

A191 In Epiphania domini Sermo primus

St. Vincent Ferrer -- Sermon on the Feast of the Epiphany (Mt 2:1-12)

Mt. 2:1-12 *Douay* When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of king Herod, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. 2 Saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to adore him. 3 And king Herod hearing this, was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And assembling together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where Christ should be born. 5 But they said to him: In Bethlehem of Juda. For so it is written by the prophet:

6 And thou Bethlehem the land of Juda
art not the least
among the princes of Juda:

for out of thee shall come forth the captain that shall rule my people Israel.

7 Then Herod, privately calling the wise men, learned diligently of them the time of the star which appeared to them; 8 And sending them into Bethlehem, said: Go and diligently inquire after the child, and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I also may come to adore him. 9 Who having heard the king, went their way; and behold the star which they had seen in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the child was. 10 And seeing the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. 11 And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him; and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having received an answer in sleep that they should not return to Herod, they went back another way into their country.

"And falling down they adored him," (Mt 2:11)

Today's feast is commonly called Epiphany or Appearance, which is the same. Because the Virgin Birth which had been hidden and secret, today was manifest to the nations. So the churchmen say and call this feast Epiphany, from "epi" which is "above" and "phanos" which is "appearance," because the star appeared over the nations. In order that God should wish to give us sentiments of sweetness of this feast in our souls, let us salute the Virgin Mary, etc.

"And falling down they adored him." The assigned reading reveals to us in a few words the great and perfect reverence which the three kings of the east offered today to our Lord Jesus Christ, "falling down, etc." Not only did they uncover their heads, nor were they content to bend their knees, but they folded their hands and arms, and even their whole body. "And falling down they adored him," (Mt 2:11).

Now to give us a reason for this adoration – for reason begets understanding, and authority confirms belief – I find in sacred scripture that for true, devout and perfect adoration two things are required: a reverent attitude of the interior mind, and a humble gesture of the outward body. As for the first, when man thinks of the infinite and incomprehensible majesty of God and his transcendent power, there comes a reverent trembling interiorly in the soul, and from this there follows exteriorly a humility in the body, joining the hands, genuflecting, or prostrating oneself in prayer to God. Divine adoration consists in these two.

To understand this reason, it must be understood that God created man in his substantial being different than other creatures. Man is a composite, substantially with respect to the soul, and materially with respect to the body. Not so the angels, who are only spiritual substances, nor the animals which are material substances. Because of this man is similar to the angels and animals, because he has both.

So God wishes to be worshipped by both: from the soul thinking of the majesty of God, and from the body through humble gestures. Just like a landowner who leases his field and vineyard for a certain assessment of use. He requires an accounting from both, otherwise he takes back to himself the whole commission. So God is with us. He gives us the vine, the soul which makes the heart drunk with the love of God, and the field of the body that it might bear the fruit of repentance and mercy. So from both he would have a reckoning of devout adoration. Of the angels he asks only spiritual adoration, reverential movements of the mind. Of the animals he asks only a reverential posture of the body, like the ox and ass when they adored Christ in the manger, because they could only bend their knees, but interiorly they had no thoughts. But from us God wishes both, namely the reverent motion of the mind, and bodily actions.

Christ said, "But the hour comes, and is now, when the true adorers shall adore the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father also seeks such to adore him. God is a spirit; and they who adore him, must adore him in spirit and in truth," (Jn 4:23-24). Note, "the hour comes," the time of the law of grace, "when the true adorers shall adore the Father in spirit" with respect to the soul, "and in truth" with respect to the body, because that is truth, when the body conforms and corresponds to the mind. And he gives a reason, saying, "God is a Spirit," and so it is necessary to "adore him in spirit and in truth."

Think of the miracle found in John 9, of the man born blind, given sight by Christ, to whom he says: "Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered, and said: 'Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in him?' And Jesus said to him: 'You have both seen him; and it is he who is talking with you.' And he said: 'I believe, Lord. And falling down, he adored him,'" (Jn 9:35-38). See the reverential interior movement in the soul and the external bodily gesture, because "falling down he adored him."

The three kings acted thus when they saw the infant Jesus. Instantly there entered into their souls a movement of reverential fear from the presence of divine majesty. And so, "prostrating themselves they adored him."

Of these three kings I shall explain four points

First how they prepared themselves diligently [*se paraverunt diligenter*]

Second how they went forth courageously [*ambulaverunt fortiter*]

Third how they sought him persistently [*quaesierunt firmiter*]

Fourth how they adored him profoundly. [*adoraverunt firmiter*]

And from the fourth point the theme speaks, "Falling down they adored him."

DILIGENTLY PREPARED THEMSELVES

The first point is to tell how these three holy kings aptly prepared themselves. We need to know what God promised Abraham and the holy patriarchs, that he would send his son, born into this world of a virgin, true God and true man. About this he gave clear prophecies, not only to the Jews in Judea, but also to diverse parts of the world, as a sign that he would come not only to save the Jews, as they falsely believe, but also all those believing in him and obeying him.

He especially sent prophecies to the eastern regions – where there were great prophets and wise men – through the prophet Balaam saying: "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not near. A star shall rise out of Jacob and a scepter shall spring up from Israel: and shall strike the chiefs of Moab," (Num 24:17). Note: "I shall see him," Christ, whom he saw not in himself but through his successors; "I shall see him, but not now," because from the text of the bible there were 1,500 years from Balaam to Christ. But these three kings were from their own time [genere], and he gave them signs saying: "A star shall rise out of Jacob," from the promised land, "and a scepter shall spring up from Israel," the Messiah king savior, and he "shall strike the kings of Moab," which is so interpreted. It [Moab] signifies the devil who is the father of sinners, to whom Christ said: "You are of your father the devil," (Jn 8.44), "the kings of Moab," i.e. of the devil or of Lucifer.

And there are seven princes who are the captains of the seven capital sins:

- The first prince, and captain of pride is called Leviathan, in Job 40, (v. 20). He is the king over all the sons of pride.
- The second prince, and captain of avarice is called Mammon, about whom Christ spoke in Matthew 6:24: "You cannot serve God and mammon."
- The third prince, and captain of lust is called Asmodeus, about whom we read in Tobit 3:8: "And a devil named Asmodeus had killed them," namely the lusting [bridegrooms].
- The fourth prince, of envy is called Beelzebub. Luke, 11:15 " He casts out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of devils," The word was about the envy of the Jews of Christ.
- The fifth prince, of gluttony is called Beelphegor. Ps. 105:28: "They also were initiated to Beelphegor: and ate the sacrifices of the dead."
- The sixth prince, of anger is called Baalberith. Judges 9:4: "...out of the temple of Baalberith: wherewith he hired to himself men."
- The seventh prince, of sloth is called Astaroth. I Kings 7:3: "Put away the strange gods from among you, Baalim and Astaroth: and prepare your hearts unto the Lord."

Lord Jesus Christ struck down these seven princes with the staff of his preaching. David said: "The Lord will send forth the scepter of your power out of Sion," (Ps. 109:2).

About this prophecy of Balaam, Chrysostom says, that his disciples and those who were of his kind, after his death wished to observe that star. And they ordained that certain ones of them would stand on the tall Mount Victory, to gaze at the heavens. There they would wash themselves, believing that by this their sins were forgiven, and they would pray saying, "O God of heaven, God of Israel, send the star," and fulfill the prophecy," (Cf. [James of Voragine, Golden Legend](#)). And so they divided up times [to watch] for themselves. And on the night of the nativity, by divine providence, these three Kings of the East, great philosophers and astrologers, on Mount Victory saw the predicted star. And at the moment when Christ was born of the Virgin's womb, the star appeared to them extremely bright, and low in the sky, nor did daylight dim its appearance.

Chrysostom repeats the opinion that there was the image of a child in that star, with a cross on his forehead. Some say that the Magi wanted to adore the star. But Augustine says that the angel of the Lord told them that they should not adore the star, but that they should make their way to adore the newly born Creator.

Then the kings took counsel how they should travel, how they should prepare, and what they should bring to offer to him, saying, "He is a great king and powerful. We should offer him gold. And he is God and creator, because the stars serve him, so we shall offer him incense. And in this sign of the cross it is revealed that he is to die on a cross, and so we shall offer him bitter myrrh." [*Ecclesiast.*] The Magi seeing the star, consulted each other. "This is the sign of a great king. Let us go and inquire of him and offer him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh."

I believe, therefore, although it is not written, that the holy kings symbolized in their gifts what they believed about Christ. I believe that also [it was expressed] in their clothing, because the king who brought the gold, was clothed in a gold shirt, and the one who brought the incense, in a purple tunic, and the one with the myrrh, in a red scarf. See how they made themselves fit both in gifts as well as clothing.

Morally.

I find in sacred scripture that God promised men two stars, one in the old law, namely that which appeared to the eastern kings, which prefigured the redemption of mankind. The second, and better, was promised in the new testament saying: "And he that shall overcome, and keep my works unto the end, ... I will give him the morning star," (Rev 2:26,28). This signifies heavenly salvation. Note, he who shall conquer the devil through humility, the flesh through chastity, and the world through poverty, "and keep my works unto the end...I will give him the morning star," i.e. the good angel guiding the soul to Christ. See how the angels in sacred scripture are called stars. The reason is because just as the heavenly firmament is decorated and bedecked with stars, so the empyreal heaven is decorated and bedecked with angels, and so they are referred to as stars. Authority: "And the stars have given light in their watches, and rejoiced: They were called, and they said: Here we are: and with cheerfulness they have shined forth to him that made them," (Bar 3:34-36). Note "the stars," i.e. angels, "stars have given light in their watches" i.e. to men who were keeping watch. David: "For he has given his angels charge over you; to keep you, commanded to his angels to keep you," (Ps. 90:11). They bring to the understanding what ought to be believed, to the memory what is to be feared and remembered, and to the will what is to be hoped for, and to deeds, what is to be done. And when a man receives the light of their instruction, he rejoices.

And in the end, when a man is in the arms of death, God sends the morning star, i.e. an angel who leads the soul to Christ, just as that star led the kings to Christ. And so it happens that if this [Epiphany] star is corruptible, because it is immediately was changed back into the underlying material, once it had been observed and desired, how much more should we await that incorruptible star, by washing ourselves from all uncleanness and sins? First by washing our heart from anger, rancor and ill will; our mouths from blasphemies, lies and detractions; our hands from theft and extortion and the like; and the whole body from the corruptions of lust and carnal sins.

Note from the aforesaid evidence that this star which appeared brighter in the birth of Christ was not one of the heavenly stars, for five reasons, which St. Thomas gives [III Pars, q. 36, a. 7](#). St. Thomas says, repeating the opinions of others, that the essence of this star most probably was of a new creation, not in the heaven, but in the atmosphere, which moved according to

divine will. Augustine believed namely that it was not of the heavenly stars, because he says in his book [Contra Faustum Bk. 2](#), "Besides, this star was not one of those which from the beginning of the world continue in the course ordained by the Creator. Along with the new birth from the Virgin appeared a new star." Chrysostom believes this too.

PROCEEDED WITH COURAGE

The second point is to declare how the three holy kings proceeded with courage, because from the head of the world, namely from the East, they came for thirteen days to Judea which is in the middle of the world. In fact, from what I have found in the text and in the Glosses of the doctors, having prepared themselves they immediately began their journey.

The star first rose ahead of them, showing them the way which they should take. So that when they had to climb a hill, first the star rose, and when they had to descend, it descended. When they had to cross a river, the star showed them the place to ford it. And when they were in a village in which they had to rest, the star would remain motionless over the hotel. Then when they were leaving the star would lead again and they would follow. Doesn't this seem to you to be a great miracle? In this way they came to their destination, the promised land.

And on the next day when they were to enter the land of Judah, the star disappeared from their sight. Imagine the sadness they had, saying, "O woe! What is this? Has the star disappeared because of some sin of one of us? What should we do?" St. Thomas Aquinas says that they took counsel on what they should do. One said that they should return, because to seek a new king in a foreign land would be very dangerous. Others said that they should at least go into the city of Jerusalem; "Such a king ought to be born in a noble city, or at least they would know where he had been born, because there were great rabbis and professors there, so let us do what we can." And they came to the city of Jerusalem.

And then was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, saying: "Arise be enlightened, O Jerusalem: for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold darkness shall cover the earth, and a mist the people: but the Lord shall arise upon you, and his glory shall be seen upon you. And the Gentiles shall walk in your light, and kings in the brightness of your rising," (Is 60:1-2). The gentles speak to the Jews as if to a person sleeping saying: "Arise" city of Jerusalem, "be enlightened," with the brightness of the light of faith, "for your light is come," the Christ. Note: "And the Gentiles shall walk in your light," not just the Jews.

Morally:

The kings, having lost their star, came to Jerusalem, so that they can be instructed there. So should we do when we lose the star of the grace of God. You know that the grace of God is called a star, signified by the star of the kings. Why? Because just as that star directed and led the kings to Christ in Judea, so the grace of God directs and leads and shows the way to paradise to those who have it. At a fork in the road it points out the way, to the right. O how many forks in the road there are in this world for those who chose not to go to Christ.

- First is of pride and vanity to the left; of sweetness and humility to the right. The star of the grace of God points to the right, the way of humility, which is the correct way, straight and good and without danger.

- Second is [the fork] of avarice and desire; and of mercy and liberality.
- Third is [the fork] of lust and carnal desires; and purity and innocence.
- Fourth is [the fork] of envy and malice on the left; and of benevolence and goodness on the right, which the star of grace makes clear.
- Fifth is of gluttony and voraciousness; and abstinence and moderation.
- Sixth is [the fork] of anger and brutality; and of peace and unity.
- Seventh is [the fork] of torpor and laziness; of diligence and industriousness.

In these the star of the grace of God directs us, also the star of the grace of God shows the way, ascending through the contemplative way and descending through the active way for works of mercy and piety. It also shows the crossing on the river of worldly delights, where many are drowned, submerged by food and drink and clothing, and tastes, etc.

So Blessed John says: "Let the anointing, which you have received from him, abide in you. And you have no need that any man teach you; but as his anointing teaches you of all things," (1John 2:27) Note: "the anointing," Gloss, i.e. divine grace. But what must you do when the state of divine grace is lost, which is not lost but through mortal sin? I say you ought to do what those holy kings did, namely go to Jerusalem, i.e. to the church, to confess our sins, and so rediscover the star of the grace of God. Thus Christ said to Paul, who lost the star, "Go into the city, and there it shall be told you what you must do," (Acts 9:7). Note, "the city" i.e. Damascus, which is translated "bloody" and signifies the church in which the blood of Christ is consecrated and consumed.

SOUGHT HIM DISCREETLY

The third point is how these three holy kings sought Christ discreetly, the place of the birth of Christ, after they had been in the city of Jerusalem. When the kings were near the city, think how there was a disturbance in the city, especially because Herod, who was a new king, and a foreigner to the people of Judah, feared for himself, and kept himself apart from them. Think how Herod immediately sent for the kings to find out who they were, and whom they sought, and why they had come. The kings replied that they had come to seek the newly born king of the Jews. You can imagine that someone warned them "Do not tell, otherwise Herod would follow you." They did not deny the truth. "We have seen his star in the east, and have come to adore him," (Mt 2:2). Chrysostom: "Consider the devotion of the kings. They have not yet seen Christ, and they are prepared to die for him." Herod had asked why they had come. Think what fear and pain entered into his ear, especially because he was already afraid of this. And he had heard of the wonders which would happen at the birth of the Christ, on account of which he considered himself ruined and destroyed. About this the Evangelist Matthew writes: "[Herod] hearing this, was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him," (Mt 2:3). But he hid his malice, feigning joy at the birth of Christ. And because the kings of the east had come in simplicity, and unarmed, he permitted them to enter the city and received them honorably.

Next, he said to them, "My lords, why have you come?" They replied, "We seek the whereabouts of the one who has been born king of the Jews." See what peril they placed themselves in. Herod, dissimulating, said, "I have heard something of this, but I don't know whether it is certain that he has been born." The kings replied: "It is certain, because we have

seen his star in the east." Then Herod said: "And now, my lords, what do you wish?" They responded, "We have come with gifts to adore him." Then Herod, in a loud voice, eagerly asked of them the time when the star appeared to them. In private he asked them, "Tell me exactly the day and time of his birth. And I, with my masters, doctors and rabbis shall tell you of the place where he has been born, that we all might come to adore him." O deceiver! With his other hand he already was readying the sword, that he might cut him down if he could. And gathering all the chief priests and the scribes he consulted them as to where the Christ would be born. They all agreed and responded it was in the city of Bethlehem according to the prophet Michea: "And you, Bethlehem Ephrata, are a little one among the thousands of Judah: out of you shall he come forth to me he who is to be the ruler in Israel," (Mic 5:2). Note "who is to be the ruler," ruler in virtues, by the example of his behavior and preaching. Then Herod informed the kings of the place, and sending them to Bethlehem said: "Go and diligently inquire after the child, and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I too may come to adore him," (Matt. 2:8). O betrayer! Enemy of the Church! Wicked Herod, why do you fear the Christ to come? He who rules [gives] the celestial kingdom does not seize a mortal kingdom. Thus the holy kings sought him discreetly and with great diligence.

Morally:

The holy kings, before they came to Herod, were guided by a star, but after they had gone to King Herod, they turned again to holy scriptures to guide themselves, etc. Herod signifies the Antichrist, because just as Herod wishing to kill the Christ, killed the innocents, so the Antichrist wishing to destroy the faith of Christ, shall kill Christians contradicting him. And that star signifies human science, logic, philosophy, laws, canons, by which we are now directed and ruled. But in the time of the Antichrist it shall be necessary to turn again to sacred scriptures, because the Antichrist shall not believe in logic, nor philosophy nor poetry nor laws, etc. Only with sacred scripture shall we make a stand against him. Therefore how guilty are we now, because no one cares about the Bible. Laypeople give themselves to profitable sciences. And among religious, who ought to study sacred scripture, one devotes himself to Virgil, another to Ovid, another to Terence, and so for the others. This is one sign, among others, of the nearness of the Antichrist. Because the Antichrist, to prove his error that he is the Messiah and the son of God etc., shall bring forth only the text of the Bible and the prophets. How do you defend yourself, to refute him, if you are ignorant of the Bible? About this there is a prophecy of Solomon saying, "When prophecy shall fail, the people shall be scattered," (Prov 29:18). This prophecy speaks of the old testament. Christ speaks to all, saying, "Search the scriptures, for you think in them to have life everlasting; and the same are they that give testimony of me," (Jn 5:39).

ADORED HIM PROFOUNDLY

The fourth point is how they adored him profoundly. After they had received the instruction or permission to depart from Herod, and when they had come to Jerusalem's gate, the star reappeared to them. O if one could express the joy which they had! And Matthew relates this. "And seeing the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy," (Mt 2:10) We now know the reason why the star hid from them, so that by a double sign, the star and the scriptures, they might be certified of the truth and would have a double testimony. And the star went before them as before.

When they were near Bethlehem, the judges and officials of Bethlehem, who had heard of their arrival, came to meet them saying, "What do you wish? And why do you come here?" They replied, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and we come to adore him." They said, "We know no other king but Herod." O liars! That star illumined those three kings, and the sun, that is, Christ, was not able to illuminate them. Their sinfulness was blinding them, placing an obstacle on the night of the nativity, when [light] was shining. And the star was seen by all, as Maximus says in his sermon for today. "Rightly one star shone, the rays of which a faithless people were not able to hide, nor hide its truth; where the very heaven of the universe shone forth with a sidereal light to the eyes of everyone." Think when the Jews looked at the star, how it brought devotion to the good, and instilled terror on the wicked. How they wondered because it did not shine from very high up. The kings followed it and entered the city and finally came to the place where the child was.

The holy teachers tell us that the Virgin Mary was still in that cave with the child where she had given birth. And the Gloss says that Joseph, by divine providence, was not there at that time, lest he himself be thought to be the father of the child. When the Virgin Mary sensed that the army which she feared was coming, imagine how she hid the child in the manger and began sewing and knitting, praying, and her whole heart trembled.

The star stood above the place where the child was. And the kings were amazed when they did not see a palace there, or a noble house, and they looked at each other saying, "How is it that the star is not moving?" Maximus says that the star emitted new and brighter rays, which told the kings "Here is the king whom you seek." The kings dismounted from their horses and beasts, and one of them coming to the entrance of the cave lifted up the door-covering a little, and aske, "Who is here?" He saw the Virgin knitting and sewing. The other two kings approached, and when they saw the Virgin Mary, they immediately were seized with great devotion. She said to them, "My lords, what do you seek?" They asked: "Do you know where the one is who has been born King of the Jews, because we wish to adore him." The Virgin Mary did not say that she did not know, but she said, "Lords, the great ones, the rabbis and rectors of the city ought to know." She spoke the truth, and immediately the kings hearts were fully inflamed. And again going out they looked for the star. It was standing immediately overhead, and not moving. It was even more beautiful. They returned to the Virgin and they said to her, "Have you a son?" She responded, "Yes, my lords." "How long is it since you gave birth?" She replied, "Lords, today is the thirteenth day." The kings said "Dear young woman, please show him to us." Then the Virgin, knowing that they had come with good intentions, picked up the child from the manger, and held him out to them. They said: "What is his name?" The Virgin Mary replied, "Jesus." In hearing the name they prostrated themselves and adored him saying, "O Savior, it is good that you have come. O Lord such is your humility that you have wished to come in a stable of this miserable world. You who are infinite in divinity, are now confined in humanity. You who are Creator, have become a creature. You who are immortally and invulnerably safe, have become vulnerable and mortal. O Lord this is such a grace!" And weeping they kissed his feet. Then adoring the mother, they said, "O Chamber of Paradise, Temple of God, Chalice of the Holy Spirit. O Blessed, you have brought to us a Savior."

The evangelist says that opening their treasures they gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold for a great king, frankincense for the true God, and bitter myrrh for one who would suffer. And so the prophecy of David was fulfilled of this day saying, "The kings of Tharsis and the islands shall offer presents: the kings of the Arabians and of Saba shall bring gifts: And all kings of the earth shall adore him: all nations shall serve him," (Ps 71:10-11). Note, they "shall serve him," namely for the good reward and remuneration which he gives to his servants. Otherwise one serves the world, which brings death to his servants and delivers his soul to the devil, for eternal punishment. But Christ gives grace to his servants in this world, and glory in the next. Therefore he is to be served, and so Christ said, "The Lord your God shall you adore, and him only shall you serve," (Mt 4:10).

Then the holy kings prayed to God, that He might show them if they should return to Herod. But the Evangelist says, that "having received an answer in sleep," from an angel, "that they should not return to Herod, they went back another way into their country," (Mt 2:11).

Think a moment here, when Joseph came and saw such gold, incense and myrrh, how he rejoiced. But on the other hand he was saddened, that he was not judged worthy to be present for such a special event. St. Bernard says that they gave all of their gold out of love of God.

Morally.

- From the example of the kings we ought to offer the gold of our conversion. Such a person can say with David, "I have loved your commandments above gold and topaz," which is a precious stone, "therefore was I directed to all your commandments: I have hated all wicked ways," (Ps 118:127-128).
- Second, the frankincense of devout prayer, saying, "Let my prayer be directed as incense [in your sight]," (Ps 140:2).
- Third we should offer the myrrh of voluntary penance. And such a one can say, "You shall ... make me to live. Behold in peace is my bitterness most bitter: but you best delivered my soul that it should not perish," (Is 38:16-17).