

Gospel text

Matthew 2: 1-12

1 After the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea at the time of King Herod, it happened that oriental astrologers appeared in Jerusalem. 2 "Where is the king of the newly born Jews?", they asked. "For we saw his star appear in the east, and so we came to bow down to him." 3 When he heard these words, King Herod was disturbed, as were all the citizens of Jerusalem. 4 After having gathered the high priests and the Bible scholars in the population, he began to inquire where the messiah was to be born. 5 They answered him, "In Bethlehem in Judea, for it is said in the book of the prophet:

6 And thou, Bethlehem, land of Judas,
you are by no means the most insignificant city that has given leaders of Judah,
because this leader will come from you
who will lead my people Israel."

7 Following these words, Herod secretly summoned the astrologers to tell him the exact date on which the star appeared, 8 and after sending them to Bethlehem, he said to them, "Go and inquire with accuracy on this child; and if you ever find him, come and tell me so that I too can bow down to him. 9 Following the king's words, they left. And now the star they saw in the east led them until they reached their destination, and then it stood above the place where the child was. 10 Having thus seen the star, they felt an overwhelmingly great joy. 11 After entering the house, they see the child with Mary, his mother. So they bowed down to him, kneeling, then after opening their boxes, they offered him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 But following a warning during a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their country by another way.

Gospel commentary - Homily

The ambiguity of the paths to God

If there is a consensus among biblical scholars, it is that of considering this story of the Magi, also called astrologers, as a tale, a fictional story. Yet it is not a story for children, because through this story, Matthew presents us with a great theological vision, a vision that presupposes adult faith.

First of all, we can clearly see that he anticipates through these oriental astrologers the coming of non-Jews to the Christian faith, which will take place a few years after the death of Jesus. The act of prostrating oneself before Jesus, of offering what was most precious at the time, can only be understood if one intends to express a very great faith, and a faith that is coming of age. The threat that hangs over Jesus and the opposition he meets, not only from King Herod, but also from the people of Jerusalem, anticipates his trial and death, while presenting him in the guise of the new Moses, who faced a plot for elimination when he was still a child.

But this story, in its very magical dimension, seems to me to reveal something very striking about our spiritual journey. What brings these astrologers on the road to Jesus? A star. In other words, it is the attention to nature and the questions it raises that sets them in motion. Personally, I have always been fascinated by the world of astronomy and astrophysics, and the existence of this universe has always been for me an enigma; at dark times, when the scandal of evil tried to make me deny certain affirmations of faith, the mystery of the universe was there to keep open the question of God. When I hear Jesus speak of sheaf of wheat, mustard seed, sky birds, I know that all of this played a role in his journey.

What is even more surprising is to see Matthew give his nobility to dreams as a place to listen to the word of God: astrologers will be warned in dreams to avoid Herod. In fact, it is the whole psychic universe, with its areas of darkness and clarity, which also belongs to the universe of the revelation of the mystery of God. This fact fascinates me: we spend a third of our lives asleep, and this moment which is usually lived only as a time of recovery seems to have its place in God's plan.

It is now time to ask the question: in this world of creation, with its physical and psychic dimension, what place does the so-called religious world occupy, and more particularly Scripture? In the account of Matthew, it occupies a central place, since our oriental astrologers need the help of the biblical scholars to be oriented towards Bethlehem; the observation of the star gave them only a general direction, and they must ask for more precision on the place of birth of this new king. The answer will come from Scripture. Personally, I wonder where my understanding of the mystery of God would be without the help of Scripture, and more particularly, of the Gospels, even if the physical and psychic universe fascinates me.

But... All of these paths are ambiguous. Who then will oppose Jesus? In our story, there is first the political body personified by Herod, but there is also the religious body personified by the high priests and Bible scholars. They can help, as they can harm. How can you explain that people whose mission is to open up to the mystery of God can be a real obstacle? As I write these lines, I can't help but think of everything that comes from Islamist fundamentalism. But I might as well think of many Christians locked in their privileges, their casuistry and their sclerotic universe. But let there be no illusions. The universe of creation has the same ambiguities: instead of being a path to God, it can become idolatry and a place of destruction for human beings.

How then to overcome all these ambiguities? The account of Matthew provides us with an important, even essential, lead. What did Herod fear, even if it was wrong? To lose power in front of another king. What did the high priests and Bible scholars

fear so that they might bring Jesus to trial? Their power related to the temple and Scripture. So what do these magi have? They have no power. But they follow the impulse of a passion that lives in them, that of the stars, even if it forces them to leave their country, their world. They agree to let the questions that inhabit them rise, to the point of questioning foreigners in Jerusalem. When Jews talk to them about Scripture, they open up to this universe they did not know. When they reach the goal of their research, with a lot of transparency, they let their joy burst out. By kneeling before a child, they welcome what constitutes both fragility and radical novelty. Even the dream world becomes their word. It seems like a constant attention to what comes from the most intimate and truest part of their being.

It is customary on the feast of the Epiphany to celebrate with these astrologers the arrival of the pagans to the Christian faith. Why should we not celebrate the integration of our universe, both physical and psychic in our spiritual journey?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, September 2002