

WORD TO THE WISE

JORDAN ERTLE. O.P.



THROUGH an undeserved privilege God lets man know the secrets of heaven. The wisdom hidden in God could not be known by man unless God chose to reveal it. Yet from eternity God chose to reveal His wisdom, and the magnitude of His wisdom is shown in the very manner, the time and the circumstances in which His manifestations are made.¹

Infinite Wisdom gave the Magi the privilege to be the first of the Gentiles to discover the tremendous mystery of the Incarnate presence of God upon earth. It is not in the least a detraction from God's wisdom that He should use the coming of the Magi to sound abroad His Incarnation; on the contrary, it assures us of His sovereign power. Nor is it a detraction from God's wisdom that the Divine Son should become Incarnate as an infant. According to human wisdom a man's dignity is measured by the power or wealth of his circumstances and the honor and respect paid him by subordinates. But even more is the divine wisdom manifest as, in the midst of poverty and before the feet of an infant, kings of foreign lands are brought to their knees.

THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM

Deeply seated in every human being is an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. God made us curious in order to enkindle in us our smoldering desire for the truth. We were not created wise, but inquisitive. The search for truth has a magnetic attraction upon the mind because it leads man to discover new realities through a deeper penetration of knowledge already possessed. It is like the dividend a shareholder receives from money prudently invested. God has spread before us an endless variety of objects upon which we may center our thought; all of which can lead us very naturally to know the existence of an infinite Designer. But there is a limit set upon the height to which we can soar by human reason. Human wisdom is limited by the horizons of nature.

Reason can tell us that an intelligent, good, and powerful God caused the universe; but reason cannot tell us of the hidden wisdom

¹ St. Thomas, III, q. 35, a. 8; q. 36, a. 4 ad 2.

of God. The invisible hand of the Creator carved a visible sign of His own image for all to see. The human mind can find it in all created things, in every thought, every movement, every element. Though human reason sees the trace of His hand, it cannot perceive the depth of His thought, His providential designs, His hidden wisdom. He reveals these secrets only to the wise.

ONLY TO THE WISE

The philosopher can prove the existence of God, but he could never find God in a stable. The philosopher can tell of the all-powerful first cause, but he is powerless to discover God in the infant cradled in Mary's arms. Only to those wise with the wisdom of faith, is the tremendous truth of the Incarnation revealed.

THE WISE MEN

St. Matthew's account of the Magi's visit to Bethlehem mentions that they were guided by a star. We might be tempted, in our haste to learn the rest of the Gospel narrative, to regard this fact as insignificant and unworthy of any attention. To do this would be to ignore a wonderful opportunity to penetrate the solicitude of God's providence.

Tradition tells us that the Magi were astronomers from the East; a profession highly respected in their day. But when the three began their journey following the star, they were inspired by something more than astronomical research—they were looking beyond mere science. By the enlightenment of God they were seeking Wisdom itself. Astronomers of their time had not foretold the spectacle they witnessed, nor since this unique phenomenon is any similar instance recorded. Yet of all the astronomers in the East only three saw the supernatural significance of the star. Only three were truly wise. Only three gazed at the heavens with faith. Their path to Bethlehem was not merely brightened by the natural light of a unique star; their minds were illumined and their wills enkindled as they followed the star to God.

According to God's sapiential design the light of a star conducted the Magi to a truth that no galaxy can encompass, just as later on God would use a net full of fishes to transform a fisherman into the first Prince of the Church. Though all the stars show forth the existence and power of God, this unique star seen by the light of faith led to a truth no human mind could devise. It led them to the mystery of God made man. The Magi found God in the heights of the heavens: the Apostles found God in the depths of the sea. It remains for the fool to ignore and the wise to pursue.

"WHERE IS HE THAT IS BORN KING OF THE JEWS?"

(*St. Matt. 2, 2*)

When we return to the Gospel story we are just in time to overhear the Magi disclose the reason for their presence to Herod. "Where is He that is born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." Apparently the star had by this time disappeared. Left to the dictates of reason they sought the king of the Jews in the most logical place: the royal city of Jerusalem. Instead, the Messiah chose the seclusion of Bethlehem for His humble birth and the illustrious city of Jerusalem for His ignominious death.

The news of a new king of the Jews troubled Herod. Knowing his ruthless temperament, one wonders little that all of Jerusalem was troubled too. Whenever the allegiance of the people was divided between him and a contender, even though it happened to be a rightful heir to the throne, the challenger lost the support of his followers as well as his own life. Herod was as unpredictable as the sudden eruption of a volcano whose lava scorches everything in its path. Assembling the chief priests and scribes to an informal meeting, he asked them to throw light on the query of the Magi. The custodians of Scripture confirmed the news brought by the Magi and informed Herod that the vicinity of Bethlehem was to be the Messiah' birth-place. St. Augustine likens these learned interpreters of Scripture "to those who built the ark for Noah, providing others with a refuge, themselves perishing in the flood."²

The words of Holy Scripture increased the uneasiness and suspicion aroused by the coming of these strangers. But Herod gained his composure long enough to feign approval to the pilgrimage of the Magi. Lest any dry wood of expectation be heaped upon the glowing coals of the Messianic hope of those beyond the palace gates, the shrewd ruler dismissed the Easterners without an escort. Herod received the news of the Messiah with bitterness and he considered that an injustice had been done to him which demanded retribution. The God-sent contender for the rule of the Chosen People must die. Herod's counterfeit wisdom blinded him from seeing the stupendous fact that man lives in God's world; God does not live in man's world.

Eagerly the wayfarers resume their journey trying to pace their beasts to the rapid beats of their anxious hearts. They cannot content themselves with the quicksand of a half truth. They are intent upon seeing the truth, the whole truth. So the sacrifices that are demanded, the obstacles to overcome, and the persevering efforts still to be made

² Sermon of St. Aug.

are seriously pondered; but the hopeful possession of a precious truth urges them on. In common with the Scribes and priests they are aware of the new born King and the vicinity of His birth. Unlike them, however, the Magi will not rest until they are enrolled in His service.

“THEY FOUND THE CHILD WITH MARY HIS MOTHER”

(St. Matt. 2, 11)

The value which the Magi had set on truth was now to enrich their own lives. Self-sacrifice brought its hundredfold. What they found has quickened their hearts. They stand breathless at the entrance to the humble dwelling like one silently rejoicing on the threshold of an accomplished victory. St. Matthew expresses this wonderful event briefly but richly by stating that, “they found the child with Mary his mother.” The Magi found Incarnate Wisdom resting in the arms of humility.

None of the words exchanged at this cherished moment have been recorded by St. Matthew, but the facts that surround this incident are unmistakably clear. Infinite Wisdom chose His own blessed Mother to mediate between Him and creatures. The Book of Proverbs reminds us that, “where there is humility there is wisdom.”³ This then accounts for Mary’s presence. She stands before men as an indefatigable teacher, instructing them that docility and humility are pre-requisite for embracing supernature truths. It is not unfounded for Holy Mother Church to invoke Mary as “Seat of Wisdom.” Wisdom was meant to be shared, and for His purpose God destined the humble Virgin to be His first pulpit. The bold suggestion that Mary indulged in proud delight at receiving the Word of God into her virginal body is immediately dispelled if we recall that Mary gave herself the title “Handmaid of the Lord.” Mary has never competed with God for the love of creatures. She is fully aware that all she has is hers from God. While God took the tunic of human nature from Mary, she could never forget that God arrayed her with the singular privilege of an immense share in His own love. It is the deep humility of Mary that prompted one of the saints to exclaim, “he who seeks Jesus without Mary, seeks Him in vain.”

“AND FALLING DOWN THEY WORSHIPPED HIM”

(St. Matt. 2, 11)

If we have prolonged the time between the Magi’s presence before the child and the adoration they gave Him, it was not to

³ Proverbs, 11, 2.

insinuate that the Magi hesitated because of pride or doubt. Through the gift of faith which had been given them, they instantaneously prostrated themselves in homage before Him. The journey with all its accompanying hardships was like an event that never took place. They could only remember this instant. It was a moment hidden from the world but a tremendous moment for them engrossed in intimate contemplation of the world's Maker. God was no longer to be found through the vague signposts left by Him in nature. God was present to them in all His divine and human nature. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity was really and truly present and they were fully aware of His Divinity.

The awesome atmosphere, unlike anything they had ever experienced before in their lives, demanded that they should acknowledge in their minds and before men the Word made Flesh. The Magi through wisdom born of faith penetrated the exterior helplessness of a babe and absorbed as much of the Divine majesty as their own feebleness would allow. Since the moment they understood the vocation given them by God, nothing could dissuade them from ordering their lives toward fulfilling His will. For this reason the Magi even in our own day are known as the Wise Men.

"OPENING THEIR TREASURES" (*St. Mt. 2, 11*)

The Wise Men, as we have it on their own testimony, came to adore. They were disposed from the outset to do just that. They did not have to open clenched fists, closed minds and cold hearts: they only had to open their treasures. They offered the best that they had, realizing that it was an inadequate expression of what they felt in their hearts. Regulated by inspired wisdom, the visitors acknowledged the Infant for all that He was and presented gifts befitting His dignity.

Tradition stemming from the early Fathers of the Church has memorialized the gifts offered to the Christ Child by attaching a symbolic meaning to them. Contrary to Herod's suspicion that the Messiah had come to take what was his, the Wise Men presented gold to a King whose kingdom was not of this world. By the gift of frankincense they declared their consuming love for the one true God and thereby sacramentalized its use in the Christian liturgy. Through the gift of myrrh which was used regularly in the anointing of dead bodies, the Wise Men saluted the human nature which they had in common with the Christ Child and professed their gratitude for His mission on earth.

From the abundance of material resources which they had in

common they offered a common gift. But behind the hands that brought these tokens of riches and bounty was an unalloyed oblation of self. It was the one thing that no one of them could pledge for the other. The one thing that crowned each of their lives and distinguished one from the other: it was the obeisance of their individual person. Person is the characteristic which sets each man apart as autonomous. Yet, the Wise Men, while valuing their independence, bowed in homage before God who made them free. These venerable men were not exhibitionists in the public eye, they were submissive servants searching the secret chambers of their hearts, to express their self-surrender before their Master.

CONCLUSION

As we watch the Wise Men steal away under the cover of the stars and fade out of the pages of Scripture, we should harbor no thoughts of envy concerning the blessings that have enriched their lives. The Magi approached God laden with earthly treasures but returned home filled with heavenly wealth. They have pioneered the road which leads to God and have left their landmarks behind which enable us to follow. Formed by faith and nurtured by wisdom they spread the truth everywhere they could. In this we see the role of the Wise Men.

For the millions of wise men who follow them, there is an equally important duty to profess before the world their faith that God is really present in the world. The weakness of an infant did not prevent the Magi from worshipping God; the appearance of bread and wine should not impede Catholics blessed with faith from adoring God in the Holy Eucharist. The fact that they found Him in a cave instead of a royal palace, did not blind them to His royal dignity; the fact that we find Christ in a tabernacle without seeing the divine splendor of the celestial court, should not diminish our loving service in the kingdom of His Church. We are eternally grateful to the Wise Men of old for showing us the way. We, like them, will not count the cost to make the journey because we know that like them we will return richer than when we began.