

Feast of the Epiphany 2017

What difference would it make if the story of the Magi had not been included in our tradition about the birth of Christ?

We might think that we already have enough information:

We know, for example, that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Most High God, that he was foreordained to save his people Israel.

We know of his humble birth and how utterly accessible he was, even to those who had no power and did not count for anything in the eyes of the proud.

What does the story of the magi bring to the tradition that makes all that much difference?

A couple of things come to mind:

First, we are reminded that Jesus' very birth is a confrontation to those in power.

The magi arrive in Herod's court looking for the newborn king of the Jews. And Herod knows immediately that they are not talking about any offspring of his.

That can mean only one thing to him: He has competition for the throne.

Not only that. His competition's arrival has been announced by a star. That's pretty powerful!

Herod knows that he's no son of David, and that he's gotten the throne not through any hereditary right, but through clever scheming and bald-faced power.

Of course, he is going to be concerned by the news.

There's more than that going on, though.

It's good to remember that the magi were not there because they had heard the news by word of mouth.

The heavens had proclaimed it.

Needless to say, when that happens you know something big is going on.

Also, the proclamation came to men who probably did not have a prior notion of all the history of the Jewish people. That's why they went straight to the palace in Jerusalem to get final directions.

The news about the newborn king of the Jews was an invitation to believe that his arrival would be important outside the boundaries of Judea and Israel.

I think that's an important element that this episode brings into the story of salvation—it's meant for everyone and everything. Not only magi from foreign countries get involved, but the very stars are called upon to play a part!

Feast of the Epiphany 2017

What I take from that is the conviction that the birth of Jesus has universal consequences. Actually, that conviction is found in our creed.

We say, "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church..." Catholic is a synonym for universal.

The salvation story handed down to us, the one we are called upon also to pass along, is not limited to one people. It's not even limited to one species.

Even though we are used to thinking of Christianity as a faith that helps us in our interactions with one another—love of God and love of neighbor, right?

Christianity is more universal than that. It's basically a sharing of the story of how God is completing the work of creation, which includes the salvation of sinful humanity, but is not limited to that.

So, when we are called to engage with a world around us that is more than just people, we can be confident that our Catholic, universally oriented Christian faith will have something to say about all of that.

And we, as its adherents, cannot shy away from those issues without somehow doing an injustice to what we are called to profess.

Not all Christians agree with that. For many, being Christian is focused more

on a person's individual salvation, and the rest of the creation is irrelevant.

Today, as we recognize the scope of the message of God's gift of his son, we can firm up for ourselves our own identity as Catholic Christians—those who proclaim the universality of salvation and make room for it among those things we hold dear.

The heavens are telling the glory of God. How can we not do likewise?