

Sunday's Word

January 5, 2014

SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Is 60:1-6

The nations come into the light

Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13

Kings bring gifts

Eph 3:2-3, 5-6

The mystery now revealed

Mt 2:1-11

The coming of the Magi

<http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/010514.cfm>



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Archaeologists tend to agree that this Sheba was the ancient kingdom of Saba, in what is now Yemen, at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. This country has been in the news lately as a haven for Al Qaeda terrorism, and a current target of drone missiles.

In the ancient world it was a port receiving materials from India. The Spice Road traveled north, up the west side of the peninsula, bringing the precious aromatic resins for use as incense. With its ability to mask unpleasant odors, incense had more uses in the ancient world than that of enhancing liturgical worship.

In her visit, the Queen of Sheba brought with her gold and frankincense as a diplomatic offering. But in this story there is no mention of myrrh. For this we must turn to the Song of Songs, another Solomon reference. This book contains over half of the uses of the word “myrrh” in the Old Testament. While it is conventional to associate myrrh with death and burial,

here it appears in the context of romantic love.

The gifts are not the only link between the Magi story and Solomon. Another is the tacit reference to Psalm 72, which appears today as the Response Psalm. This is a kingship hymn, with Solomon as its inspiration. The psalm primarily praises the virtue of justice as the leading quality of authentic kingly authority — much as many texts have, in this past Advent. For instance, the psalm contributes the word “homage” to the Magi story, as well as mentioning the gifts, though it doesn’t name them individually. The fact that the psalm speaks of kings visiting has probably prompted the popular notion that the Magi were kings, though the gospel story makes clear that they were not.

Today’s first reading, from Isaiah 60, is a partner to the psalm, written in the same frame of mind. Here the ingathering of nations is imagined occurring in the fullness of time. “Nations” and “kings” come flooding in to the holy city. Again, a text contributing to the rumor of kings. The imaginative passage pictures the world in darkness, with only the holy city lit from above. And then from the rustling darkness the peoples of the world are heard, and then seen coming into the light.

Meanwhile, the reading from Ephesians fills out the set from a different side. A



main theme of this letter is Paul’s apostolate to the Gentiles. But the new way in which this letter presents it can be seen in the “mystery” that “has now been revealed.” In the other Pauline writings, the mystery refers to the turn of the age, and the coming of Christ into the world. But here it is different. The meaning shifts to make the mystery refer to the surprising fact that the Gentiles are included in the good news — an appropriate note for the “Christmas of the Gentiles.”

For reflection: What, for you, is the meaning of the gifts of the Magi?

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