

EPIPHANY – 6th January 2013

WE SAW HIS STAR WHEN IT ROSE AND HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM- Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 2,1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

For the day of the Epiphany the Church proposes the Gospel of Matthew chapter 2, a chapter that to be enjoyed to the full, calls for effort on our part: to take a distance from the tradition and folklore and also the image - beautiful in itself – of the crib.

Let's see what Matthew writes. *“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king..”* Herod was an illegitimate king, he did not have a drop of Jewish blood in his veins, therefore he could not have been the king of the Jews. And he was so suspicious that someone would take his throne, that he ended up killing his own sons.

“..behold,..” The evangelist uses this expression to put the attention of something unexpected, something that appears improbable *“.. behold, wise men..”* literally wizards, magicians. Who are these wise men ' *from the east* ' ? They are pagans.

The term wise men meant at that time a soothsayer, but also, deceiver, astrologer, but also briber and charlatan. In any case it was forbidden in the Bible. In the book of Leviticus the activity of the magician was strictly forbidden, and even in the Christian world it did not have a good name, so much so that in the primitive catechism of the Christian church, that was called Didache, the activity of magician was placed between the prohibition of stealing and abortion.

So, we have, as wise men, individuals despised also by the Bible, and as pagans they are far from God. The evangelist wants to signify that God's universal love spreads itself everywhere, not only for its extension but also for its quality: God's love is for all, even for the categories thought to be the furthest away from him or most despised.

"..came to Jerusalem..", The wrong place! They went to the place less adapted to find Jesus. Jesus will not be born at Jerusalem, a holy city. In Jerusalem, God's son will be killed. Put to death. *"..saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"* The evangelist confronts Herod, king of the Jews, with Jesus, the newly born king of the Jews.

"For we saw his star when it rose..", literally *we saw his star in the Orient*. This star which Matthew talks of is not searched for in the heavens, but in the Bible. The evangelist refers to a prophecy in the book of Numbers, where Balaam, a soothsayer, prophesizes, *"... a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;"* (Numbers 24,17) So it is not a cosmic event, but a theological event that the evangelist wants to indicate to us.

This will be confirmed later on. At that time it was thought that when a person was born, a new star was born also that shone until the person died.

"...and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled.." Understandable! Herod was a man that had taken the throne illegally and had fear of losing it. But more surprisingly what comes next: *".. and all Jerusalem with him;"* Even Jerusalem was troubled, frightened, Herod had taken the throne, but Jerusalem had taken on the role of God. So, Herod feared for the throne and Jerusalem feared for the loss of the temple where there was the image of a false God, that did not correspond with the Father that Jesus was to present.

".. and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born." the Messiah. It is this that Herod fears, the liberating Messiah. Herod fears Him and Jerusalem does not await Him.

"They told him,.."- the high priests and the scribes, the priestly and theological elite- *"In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:."* We see that the evangelist is polemical. The knowledge of the scripture is not a guarantee for the knowledge of the Lord. A knowledge that does not result in life is sterile, it is harmful, as in this case. And here the evangelist quotes, modifying it, a prophecy from the book of the prophet Micah (ch.5,2) *"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler..."* Micah had written 'governor', but the evangelist censors this word.

Jesus will not be a governor, so he replaces the word with " ruler", he that guides, that leads. And to help understand better, adds to the prophet Micah an expression from the second book of Samuel *"..who will shepherd my people Israel."* Therefore Jesus will not dominate, but will be the shepherd, He who takes care of his flock.

"Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared." He is preoccupied that others may see this sign that indicates the birth of the king

of the Jews. *“And he sent them to Bethlehem,..”* and here the evangelist presents us with an image of power that is always deceitful and murderess. Deceitful because it imposes the deception of his power, and murderess because he defends it with violence.

In fact Herod says *“Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”* He actually wants to eliminate him. Power is always deceitful and murderess. The evangelist invites us to keep our distance.

“After listening to the king, they went on their way..” - and here is another surprise – *“ And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them..”* They had not followed the star to go to Jerusalem, they had taken the wrong road. They went to the wrong place, to Jerusalem, where Jesus will be killed, and not to Bethlehem where He is born.

So, this time the star plays the role like God in the desert that guides his people, as the shepherd guides his flock. The star is the guide. *“... it went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.”*

It's clear that the evangelist is not as ingenuous as to present the star that moves and stops itself in the right place. It is impossible that a star can indicate where the child is. Therefore, as we said in the beginning, this star is not found in the sky, in the heavens, but in the Bible. *“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”* It is the first time that a great joy is spoken of. The last time it will appear is with the women at the meeting with the risen Christ.

The pagans and women are the furthest from God, according to the concept of that time, even so they are the ones that recognize and accept Him. *“ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother..”* the evangelist presents the regal couple *“...and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts.”* The gifts are symbolic and indicate that there is no longer an exclusive people, Israel, but a possibility for all humanity.

They offer gold, that was a symbol of regality. The evangelist wants to anticipate the fact that the Kingdom of God will be also for the pagans. There is no more the kingdom of Israel, limited to a nation, a people, a religion, but the kingdom of God, universal love, is for all even the pagans.

They offer incense which was reserved for the priests. The exclusive characteristic of Israel was to be a priestly people, to have contact with God. Also this privilege will not only be for the people of Israel, but to be priestly people – in the sense of directly communicating with God - will be for all humanity. The last offering is myrrh, that was the perfume of the bridegroom. It is found in the Song of Songs. Well, the privilege of Israel to be the bridegroom of God is no more only for that nation, but for all humanity

“And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” “another way” is a rare expression to find in the Bible, in the first book of Kings, in which it indicates the sanctuary of Betel where the golden calf was worshiped. The evangelist wants to indicate that Jerusalem by now is an idolatrous city from which we must distance ourselves.