

# Advent and Christmas Lectionary Meditations

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These lectionary meditations are slightly edited versions of the texts written for, and published by, *The Christian Century* magazine for each of the six Sundays between 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent (2 December 2007) and Epiphany (6 January 2008). Following the normal practice of *The Christian Century* the readings which underpin these meditations are those of the Revised Common Lectionary rather than the Catholic lectionary.

## Epiphany of the Lord

January 6, 2008

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

### *Radiant fulfilment*

We are used to the imagery of God communicating by God's word, and so think of our responses to God as aural: listening, and obedience (from ob-audiens – intense hearing). Yet how much of the religion of Ancient Israel was a priestly religion of Presence! We forget that one of the central images of God's communication in the Scriptures is that of the Shining face. From the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6 to the continuous references in the Psalms, it is expected that worshippers will see the radiance of God's face, and in its light, they too will shine.

The greek word for this Radiance, this shining, of the face is *επιφάνεια* – epiphany - and it was by no means only a benign thing. Promises of the Day of the Lord warn that its coming will be exceedingly dreadful, or awe-ful – the word is *επιφανης*. All this visual imagery is at the centre of today's great feast.

The Magi, long known as Kings since they were fulfilling Psalm 72, had been looking at a star, the very Star of David that had been prophesied by another foreign magus, Balaam in Numbers 24. This radiance had led them from the East to the land of Judah. The announcement to King Herod and all Jerusalem of the proximity of the radiance produces a reaction of fear. Herod thereafter has to talk to the Kings secretly. When the Kings arrive at the place where the child is, the star stops, and they are filled with exceeding joy. Thus the radiance has its double

effect – fear and darkness come upon those who oppose it, and blessing on those who seek His face.

So it is at Epiphany, the feast of the Shining, that we come to the end of the journey which began with the portentous announcement of the coming of the Lord, the streaming of the nations towards Zion, and the invitation to walk in the light of the Lord. Six weeks later we find ourselves with an array of Kings – Herod, David, the Magi, and a plethora of portents. Yet all this is directed to a simple dwelling with a newborn child. Our attention has become accustomed to understanding that the One Coming in will do so quietly, in vulnerability, in the midst of violence, prepared for suffering. So it is easy to forget something. How easy it is to read today's Gospel and not notice that the whole point of all those kings is that they are left in the shade by the radiance of the King of Kings. For the Magi have come to worship a King.

For me, at the centre of this feast is a mystery of looking. Who looks at who? We tend to focus, as adults, on the regards of adults. Matthew's narrative, with its picturesque details encourages our eyes. He trains our gaze by means of the strangeness of the Kings, the determination and persistence of their journey, their exotic dress, their laden beasts, and their rich and symbolic gifts. What might this one be who is the desire of the nations? We are taught by the desire of the Magi to value the one who lies in the manger. He acquires worth, and splendour through their eyes. And that is part of what the Feast gives us: models for our desire, for our adoration. With each gift we are being offered a way of shifting the weight of our heart in an unaccustomed direction. When the magi offer him Gold, which indicates a King, our eyes are invited to lessen the tribute we offer to the power structures to which we belong and on which we depend; when they offer him Frankincense, which indicates a Priest, we are invited to tiptoe out from under the delusions of our sacred canopies, to be drawn into the jagged-edged sacrifice of Presence this Priest will carry out; and when they offer him Myrrh, which indicates a Prophet's death, the Magi invite our hearts to lighten as death loses its hold over our drives and desires.

These however, are not the only eyes which are looking. For the Magi have come into the presence of the face, which is the radiance of the Lord. And the face, that of an infant, looks also. When it is not too tired. And when the face is not screwed up with tears. In truth it is learning how to look. The radiance is in the face which is learning to receive the adult clues which will enable it to recognise, remember, identify body parts. It is undergoing the precocious working through of images and sensations which over time will socialize it, make it viable,

responsive, subtle. Who could ever have imagined that “May He make his face to shine upon you” would one day be realised in an infant struggling with focus?

Our paintings capture a moment, so the face of the baby is backed up by an aura, a halo. But will the Magi have seen a halo? Will anyone have noticed anything slightly shining about their faces, upon which the Radiance has shone? Myself, as a modern, I doubt it. I imagine the reality of the halo as a radiance which dawned over time in the life of the Magi as in the life of all those who allow themselves to be looked at. As their gifts signify, the Presence who has come in will learn his way into being a project towards us. His whole living out of that project will become the radiant face which shines. He will learn to look at us with the eyes of a king, and he will learn to look at us with the eyes of a priest, and he will learn to look at us with the eyes of a prophet. And our world will be relativized by those eyes. And we will sit in his regard and become radiant as he guides us into the way of peace.