

The Epiphany of the Lord

Year B

GOSPEL

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After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant king of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 'At Bethlehem in Judaea,' they told him, 'for this is what the prophet wrote,

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judaea, you are by no means the least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. 'Go and find out all about the child,' he said, 'and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the King had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight and going into the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

(Matthew 2:1-12)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The word 'epiphany' means 'manifestation' or 'showing'.
- The gifts brought by the Magi (probably astrologers from Persia) reveal many things about Jesus. The gold signifies his kingship, the frankincense his priestly role, and the myrrh suggests the spices and ointment with which his body is anointed and wrapped at his death, which brought salvation.
- You will note from the text that the number of Magi is not mentioned. A later tradition developed that there were three, probably based on the three gifts, and later still they were given names!
- In some countries and cultures, gifts are given on this feast rather than on Christmas Day.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This is a wonderful story about who recognises Jesus and who does not. The Magi are from the East; they are not members of the chosen people of God, and yet they recognise the signs of a momentous birth and set out to find the child. The king of the Jews, Herod, as well as the chief priests and scribes, the very people who should be looking for the Messiah, have not seen the signs. The positive and joyful response of the gentile Magi is contrasted with the opposite reaction from those who should have known better. The Magi fall in homage to a small child in an inconspicuous house. They have recognised the divine in the ordinary and bow before him as they would a king. In Matthew's community, many were struggling with the fact that the Jews reject the proclamation of the Gospel while the Gentiles accept it and come to faith in Christ.

- Are there people who have acted as your guiding stars in your journey towards Christ?
- Are there some who have struggled to recognise why you have undertaken this journey?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- They were filled with delight. How do you express your delight at having found Jesus?
- What gifts do you bring to Christ and the church?
- Gifts establish a special relationship between the giver and receiver. We sometimes call them 'presents' because they somehow make the giver present to the one who receives. Often it is the simplest of gifts that are treasured because they recall to us someone we love. How is Christ 'present' to you?
- Share a story of a time you searched for something, whether it was a physical object, an answer or a purpose. Where did the search take you? Did you find what you were looking for? Are you still searching?
- Give a simple gift to someone this week.
- Repeat these words often this week:

*We have seen the light of his star
and have come to adore the Lord.*

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

GOSPEL

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As John stood with two of his disciples, Jesus passed, and John stared hard at him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God.' Hearing this, the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi'—which means Teacher—'where do you live?' 'Come and see' he replied; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour. One of these two who became followers of Jesus after hearing what John had said was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Early next morning, Andrew met his brother and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah'—which means the Christ—and he took Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked hard at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John; you are to be called Cephas'—meaning Rock.

(John 1:35–42)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Part of the celebration of the Passover festival was the ritual sacrifice of many lambs so that the Jews could eat the Passover meal. In the story of Exodus, the blood of the lamb was shed so that it could be daubed on doorposts and thus enable the people to escape the angel of death. John recognises that Jesus will be the one to give his life for the sake of all.
- 'Messiah' is a Hebrew word that means 'anointed one'. 'Christ' is the Greek word meaning the same thing.
- A disciple is a person who follows a particular teacher and shares his or her views.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The movement in this text is interesting to note. The Baptist and his disciples are standing still while Jesus is passing. John gives witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God, a term not normally used of a person. The disciples exhibit an interest in this man based on John's witness about him. They move away from John and towards Jesus. It is a movement of faith, although at this point they do not really understand who Jesus is. Jesus asks them a momentous question: 'What do you want?' It was normal for a teacher to gather students around him, so these two want to know where he lives so that they might come to hear his teachings. Instead they are invited not just to listen to the teachings, but to share the life of Jesus.

Having entered into this, they recognise that Jesus is more than a teacher and give witness to him themselves: 'We have found the Messiah.' They draw others to Jesus, including Simon Peter, who is to become especially important as the story unfolds.

- Did the disciples find the Messiah or did the Messiah find the disciples?
- Did you find God or did God find you?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'What do you want?' If Jesus were to address this question to you, how would you answer?
- Jesus invites the disciples to 'come and see'. Are you ready and willing to respond to this invitation?
- Share the story of the first meeting you had with someone who is significant in your life: a spouse or best friend. What was it that initially attracted you to that person? How has your relationship developed and deepened?
- Teaching was an essential aspect of Jesus' ministry. But his style was not to merely give his listeners the facts but to draw them into sharing his understanding and way of life. When these two disciples of John show interest in his way, Jesus invites them to 'come and see'—to experience his way at first hand by being with him. Can you see connections with the catechumenate?
- Spend extra time this week with your sponsor and talk about how you are experiencing life with the community. Is there more that needs to be done?
- The response to this week's psalm is a wonderful prayer of discipleship. Say it often this week:

*Here I am, Lord;
I come to do your will.*

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

GOSPEL

Jerusalem Bible © 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday & Company Inc.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come,' he said, 'and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News.'

As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.' And at once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on a little further, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets. He called them at once and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

(Mark 1:14–20)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- John the Baptist was arrested and ultimately killed by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who ruled over the region of Galilee. John had been highly critical of the behaviour of Antipas in marrying Herodias, who was his niece and the former wife of his brother.
- The Sea of Galilee is also known as Lake Tiberias and Lake of Gennesaret. It is the largest freshwater lake in Israel, and is approximately 53 km in circumference, 21 km long and 13 km wide.
- Each gospel account of the calling of the disciples is slightly different. Compare this gospel to last week's reading.
- Simon and Andrew, James and John lived in the town of Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Look at a map of Palestine. Most Bibles include one.

EXPLORING THE WORD

- This week we return to the Gospel of Mark, which will be the main source of readings through the weeks of Ordinary Time this year. Mark's Gospel was the first of the accounts of Jesus' ministry to be written down. It is widely accepted that it was written about AD 65–70 for a community in Rome where Christians were undergoing persecution because of their faith. Because of this setting, Mark often recalls stories that give great hope to people and encourage them to stay firm in their faith in the face of opposition. In this gospel, the disciples do not make excuses or delay. They simply leave everything to follow Jesus. They are immediately drawn to the words and person of Jesus; nothing else is as important as the Kingdom of God and the one who preaches it.
- What is so attractive about the person of Jesus? What drew you to follow Jesus?
- The disciples undergo conversion and take up a whole new way of life. What are the signs of conversion in yourself?
- What have you left behind to follow Christ?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- If you cast out your net, what might you catch?
- Let go of something that makes it difficult for you to follow Christ.
- Share together some experiences of leaving things behind and embarking on a new way of life: leaving home to study, travel or marry; changing jobs to something completely different; moving to a different country or city. How was the experience for you? What challenges were involved?
- This week's psalm offers a wonderful prayer for catechumens:

Teach me your ways, O Lord.

Lord, make me know your ways.

Lord teach me your paths.

*Make me walk in your truth and teach me,
for you are God, my Saviour.*

Teach me your ways, O Lord.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

GOSPEL

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Jesus and his followers went as far as Capernaum, and as soon as the Sabbath came Jesus went to the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.

In their synagogue just then there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit, and it shouted, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.' But Jesus said sharply, 'Be quiet! Come out of him!' And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. The people were so astonished that they started asking each other what it meant. 'Here is a teaching that is new' they said, 'and with authority behind it: he gives an order even to unclean spirits and they obey him.' And his reputation rapidly spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

(Mark 1:21-28)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In the ancient world, many forms of mental illness were attributed to being possessed by 'evil spirits'.
- In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is often presented in confrontational situations with evil spirits, with the Jewish authorities and even with his own disciples when they fail to understand who he is and what his mission entails.
- This text shows that where absolute good is, evil cannot remain.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This is the first of the miracles of Jesus recounted in Mark's Gospel and it is a significant introduction to the person of Jesus and the power he possesses. Only a few verses earlier, at his baptism, Jesus had been revealed as the beloved Son of God. In this short text, Mark contrasts Jesus and the authority of his teaching with that of the scribes. Jesus teaches in such a way that he makes a deep impression on his hearers. Clearly, this is because his authority and his wisdom come from God. While his human audience may still be unclear as to the true identity of Jesus, this is not the case with his 'other-worldly' audience: the unclean spirits know exactly who Jesus is—the Holy One of God—and they recognise his authority and obey his command. They know that the power of the Almighty is greater than the power of the evil one.

- In what ways today do we see evidence of the 'power of evil'? How are people held captive by this power in our world?
- In what ways can we speak and act with the spirit of Jesus against the evil we encounter?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?' What does Jesus want of you at this point in your life?
- 'I know who you are: the Holy One of God.' Is it difficult for you to make this claim? Who do you think Jesus is?
- Recall someone who made a deep impression on you. What were the qualities of that person that so impressed and drew you to them? Was there a quiet authority? Was it a charismatic presence? Share your recollections and reflection with others.
- Jesus challenged the evil that oppressed people in his time. This week, speak out, publicly or privately, against oppression or an evil in our world. Confront evil at all levels this week, wherever you may encounter it. Become part of lifting the burden from others.
- Use today's entrance antiphon as your prayer this week:

Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name and make it our glory to praise you.

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

GOSPEL

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On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straight away. He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding around the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him, they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.

(Mark 1:29-39)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In Capernaum, archaeological excavations have uncovered a house, close by the synagogue, which has ancient inscriptions suggesting it is the house of Peter.
- Capernaum was a thriving town and was a centre for the local fishing industry.
- The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and lasts until sunset on Saturday. As the day of God's rest, work was not permitted. That is why Jesus only begins his work of healing after sunset.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In touching Simon's mother-in-law and then allowing her to serve him, Jesus is breaking down traditional barriers. He brings wholeness and holiness to her by his presence. The kingdom of God cannot tolerate prejudice and taboo, just as sickness and evil have no place in the kingdom.

This text shows us a typical day for Jesus—the first of his ministry. He listens to the Word of God, then worships with his community; he relaxes in the home of a friend; he pursues his work of healing and preaching and, before dawn, he withdraws alone to develop his relationship with the Father through prayer. There is a wonderful pattern of balance here between prayer, work and rest.

When the disciples find him, they want him to return to Capernaum to the acclaim he is receiving. Instead, Jesus insists that the boundaries of the kingdom be pushed out. The kingdom of God must reach further and further. It is for this that he came!

- How is the balance in your life?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'Jesus took her by the hand and helped her up.' Who has taken you by the hand and helped you when you needed it? What would you like Jesus to help you with?
- Reflect on and then share your experiences of a time in your life when you felt empty or desolate; when you were gripped by a 'demon' you could not shake. By contrast, describe other times when life was full of promise and satisfying.
- Make a special effort this week to extend a helping hand to someone in need. If you know someone who is gripped by some 'demon', offer them a word of encouragement.
- In quiet moments alone this week, recite the response to the psalm:

Praise the Lord who heals the broken hearted.

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B**GOSPEL**

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A leper came to Jesus and pleaded on his knees: 'If you want to,' he said, 'you can cure me.' Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. 'Of course I want to!' he said. 'Be cured!' And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured. Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him, 'Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery.' The man went away, but then started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.

(Mark 1:40-45)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- As the first reading suggests, having or being suspected of having leprosy caused a person to live outside the community. They were considered unclean and had to warn of their approach so that they would not contaminate others. While this was a measure to protect the community, it must have been unbearable to live this way, not only sick but totally excluded.
- The very elaborate regulations about leprosy and becoming purified after its cure can be read in Leviticus 13 and 14. Leviticus is one of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Torah or the Law. They are often referred to as the books of Moses.
- By responding to the leper and touching him, Jesus put himself 'outside the community' and is now forced to 'stay outside in places where nobody lived'.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This is yet another confrontation between Jesus and evil. In recent gospels, we have seen Jesus overcome possessing demons, sickness and social taboos; many of the themes merge in this text.

The leper takes an audacious step in approaching Jesus, defying all the rules and conventions of his society. Despite his exclusion and isolation, he has not lost hope. Jesus reacts in exactly the opposite way from that which may be expected. He is moved by pity not revulsion. Instead of sending the man away, he responds with immense compassion to the man's courage and faith. He reaches out and touches him. This is not only an act of ritual impurity but of human foolhardiness! Not wanting to be known only as a miracle worker, Jesus orders the leper not to speak of his cure but to undergo the necessary rituals to enable him to re-enter the people of Israel. The priest should be able to recognise that in the cure of the leper, the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled and the Messiah is among them. The great irony is that by curing the leper and allowing his re-entry into the community, Jesus places himself in a position where he is forced to go out into isolation in places where no one lived.

- The leper took a bold initiative in seeking his own healing. Does this resonate with your own approach to Jesus?
- What do Jesus' words tell you about God's attitude to human anguish and suffering?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Are there ways in which you are a 'leper'—marginalised in some way, on the outer, in pain, disfigured, not able to fit in? Can you make the first move towards your 'cure' as the leper did?
- 'People from all around would come to him.' How have you experienced this drawing power of faith?
- Reflect on a time when you may have felt excluded or isolated. Share your story with others. How did you overcome the isolation or exclusion? Is it still with you? Who helped to draw you back in?
- This week, reach out and touch someone who needs a sign of acceptance or a gift of compassion.
- Repeat this prayer of trust often this week:

*I turn to you Lord, in time of trouble,
and you fill me with the joy of salvation.*

