

22.01.16 Views from the Pews: Epiphany

The Feast of the Epiphany is one of the three principal and oldest festival days of the Christian church (the other two are Easter and Christmas). Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and other Western churches observe the feast on January 6, while some Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate Epiphany on January 19, since their Christmas Eve falls on January 6.

Epiphany, also called Feast of the Theophany (from Greek *epiphaneia*, “manifestation”), commemorates the first manifestation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi, and of his divinity, as confirmed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan River.

The festival originated in the Eastern church, where it at first included a commemoration of Christ’s birth. In Rome, by 354 Christ’s birth was being celebrated on December 25, and later in the 4th century the church in Rome began celebrating Epiphany separately, on January 6. In the Western church the festival primarily commemorates the visit by the Magi to the infant Jesus, taken as evidence that Christ, the Jewish Messiah, came also for the salvation of Gentiles. In the East it primarily commemorates the baptism of Jesus, and celebrates the revelation that the incarnate Christ was both fully God and fully man.

In the West the evening preceding Epiphany is called Twelfth Night. The time between December 25 and January 6 is known as the Twelve Days of Christmas. Epiphany is celebrated with special pastries in many countries, and children often receive small gifts in their shoes in honour of the Magi’s gifts to the infant Jesus.

Who were the Magi? *Magi*, also known as “wise men”, belonged to a long-established special class of priests, philosophers, scholars, astronomers and political advisers in the Persian Empire: Daniel was appointed to be their leader by King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 5). Because of their knowledge and influence, they also served as political advisors, and even “king-makers”. (Remember, Mathew presents Jesus as the rightful king in the line of Judah). The three gifts they brought to the baby Jesus were symbols of deep spiritual significance. They did not risk such a long journey for political reasons, but to worship “he who has been born king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Whether they fully knew it or not, their gifts told the story of how God himself came down from Heaven as our King (gold) to fulfill his priestly duties (frankincense) and eventually die for our sins (myrrh).

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