

If you are a stargazer like I am, I suppose you have heard that on December 21st the Christmas Star could be observed at night. It was the result of what the ancient astrologers called a great conjunction, when Jupiter and Saturn, the two slowest planets of our solar system, are so close to each other that you can only see a great bright star. Given that Saturn needs 29.5 years to turn around the sun and Jupiter needs almost 12 years, it's extremely rare to observe such an event. It was pretty amazing to see these two planets getting closer to each other night after night. However, even on December 21st you still could see 2 planets, not one star. An amazing fact is that apparently, in 7 BC Saturn and Jupiter not only met once but three times the same year, on May 29, September 30, and Dec. 5. So it could be tempting to deduce that it was what guided the Wise Men: The first conjunction presumably started the Magi on their way to Bethlehem from the Far East. The middle conjunction may have strengthened their resolve in the purpose of their journey, while the third and final conjunction occurred just as they arrived in Judea to meet with King Herod, who sent them on to Bethlehem to "go and search diligently for the young child." ¹

We will never know for sure what guided the Wise men. We don't even know who these Wise Men were. Many think they were astronomers, stargazers, scholars of their time who advised kings by interpreting dreams and astrology. We don't even know how many they were. Ancient traditions tell us that they were three. For instance, in the 8th century, Bede the Venerable, described the kings this way: *The first was called Melchior; he was an old man, with white hair and long beard; he offered gold to the Lord as to his king. The second, Gaspar by name, young, beardless, of ruddy hue, offered to Jesus his gift of incense, the homage due to Divinity. The third, of black complexion, with heavy beard, was called Baltasar; the myrrh he held in his hands prefigured the death of the Son of man.* But none of these details are in Matthew's Gospel except the 3 gifts and their meaning, telling us that the baby the Wise Men worshipped would be a king, was divine, and would suffer.

Whoever the Wise Men were, they are intriguing and maybe they still have something to tell us today. First, they were not part of the people of Israel, they were Gentiles, a reminder that Jesus came for all people, not just for those who already considered themselves as the people of God. Around us there are so many people who are looking for meaning in their lives, so many people who have spiritual longings but don't know God, they have spiritual longing but they don't know Jesus. So many people around us have such a distorted image of God and the Church that they are lost and don't know where and how to find the deep spiritual peace they are looking for. Who will lead them to Christ? Who will help them to realize that they are loved by the God of love who became one of us in Jesus.

The wise men began their journey because of a strange sign: a star in the sky. It was not a hidden sign. If these men were able to see the star, that means that many others could have seen it too. And certainly, they did... But only these men were able to see beyond the sign and to understand that something great, something important was going to happen with the birth of a special baby. The star was such a great sign for them, that they decided to leave their comfort, to leave their families, to leave their country, and to undertake a very long, perilous, and difficult

¹ <https://www.space.com/great-conjunction-jupiter-saturn-2020-fun-facts>

journey — a physical and spiritual journey, in order to pay homage to this strange baby to come. When they began their journey they had no clue what the outcome would be. They didn't even know what to expect. They did not know where their journey would end. However, they courageously took the road guided by the star, with trust and confidence. For them there was no doubt: they discerned a divine sign, and it was enough to put them in motion and to take the risk to find out the meaning of it. They are a reminder that we don't need to have all the answers before to begin a spiritual journey. When we put our trust in the Lord, He will guide us, if only we are willing to follow His lead.

The Wise Men are an inspiration to always look with fresh eyes at the wonders of God in our hearts, in our lives, and in the world: they saw the star; they understood that it was a sign of something greater, and they decided to follow it. There are the opposite of King Herod and the religious authorities in Jerusalem who knew the Scriptures and were waiting for the expected Messiah. They should have been overwhelmed with joy when the Wise Men shared their quest with them. But their only reaction was fear. Fear of the unknown; fear that they would have to change something in their lives, their habits; and for Herod fear of losing the power given to him by the Romans.

Here is the paradox: Herod, the priests, and the scribes — specialists of the Law — knew with their minds, but not with their hearts; they knew intellectually, but it was not a life-giving knowledge. They did not take time to understand with their hearts, they did not take time to discern God's will, they did not take time and they were not willing to change anything in their well-established lives and beliefs. They thought they knew and had all the answers about God.

As we begin a new year I see in the Wise Men's journey an invitation to open our hearts and minds in order to discern the signs that God is sending to us, individually. And in order to do so, I invite all of us to take more time to read the Scriptures this year. I invite all of us to set apart daily time to encounter the Lord in prayer. When we have the habit to encounter the Lord in the Scriptures and in the secret of our heart, we are more prone to see the signs that the Lord is posting around us, we are more prone to see the Lord in the faces of our brothers and sisters in humanity.

As we begin a new year I see in the Wise men's journey an invitation to discern God's will for our congregation. This year, together, let us try to listen to what the Spirit is telling us as a Church in the midst of this pandemic. Where is God leading us? What new ways to do church should we invent in order to be faithful to our mission? How can we bring the light of Christ to more people? How to reach those who don't know Christ? How to reach those who are not represented in our congregation?

As the season of Christmas is about to end, let us remind ourselves that we are called to be light of the world. Our lives might be the only Bible some people will read. The true Christmas star is not in the sky anymore, Saturn and Jupiter can't guide us. The true Christmas star is to be found in our hearts where the Spirit lives. So, let our lives brightly shine this year. Let our lives help others to find the One who is the light of the world. Amen.