

Epiphany of the Lord

Beholding God's Epiphany

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Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

Remember the last time you looked up on a clear night and saw the stars? Not a few stars, like around here, but thousands and thousands of stars, with the milky way splashed across it? It's a wondrous sight.

Part of the cost of all our technology lies in becoming unable to see the stars, really see the stars. Can you imagine what it must have been like before the invention of the light bulb? When on a clear night you could look up and see a night sky that you and I are lucky to see perhaps only a few times in our lives?

How could our ancestors not be religious? But of course they would have taken the starry night sky for granted, the way we take being able to hurtle across vast distances in planes, trains and automobiles. What for us is a sublime experience for them would have been everyday, ordinary. They probably would not even look up at it most of the time. I remember once when I was a teenager visiting my grandparents on their isolated farm in southern Illinois. It was a clear night and I was outside, transfixed by the starry heavens. My grandmother opened the door and asked, puzzled and, knowing her, probably a little worried: "What are you doing out here?"

You know when railroads first came on the scene there were those who worried whether the human body could tolerate moving for a sustained period at such blinding speeds as thirty miles an hour. We've gained speed, but we have lost the night sky.

The magi were astrologers. They devoted their full attention to the stars, tracked their movements, recognized their patterns, interpreted their significance. They were not astronomers though-- they were not impartial, detached scientific observers of the night sky who sought to bracket their own beliefs, desires and fears lest they contaminate the data. The magi did not observe the stars, they contemplated them,

they beheld them. To behold something is more than just to see it, is to be held by it, as it discloses itself to you. Its not to assimilate it into our life but to enter into its life, its world, its reality. Its to be in awe of it.

That is why the magi were thought to be wise men. Because they knew the heavens. The ways of the cosmos. Not the way we know the universe today. A well known physicist once remarked that the more we learn about the universe the more we learn how insignificant we are. A speck alive for a moment on one of ten planets circling one of a billion stars among billions of galaxies.

But what the magi knew was not the universe of galaxies and supernova, black holes and dark matter, what they knew was the night sky as a cosmos of meaning and significance. They knew the heavens not impartially but intimately, the way a lover knows their beloved, not as an organic system of chemical processes but personally, in an attitude of wonder and gratitude. And all from beholding what anyone else could see if they would just looked up.

In today's Gospel the heavens lead the magi to the baby Jesus. They had beheld a new star rising, a comet we would say. Not calculating its composition, mass and velocity but assessing its significance, they knew it to be a portent of the birth of someone of cosmic significance. The ancients were like that, they saw nature and humanity interlocked, like lovers, sometimes in conflict, often in embrace, but never indifferent. King Herod lived under the same night sky, but he could see nothing and so could learn nothing from it. Thank heavens, literally, thank the heavens from hiding their significance from him. For while the Magi saw in the child a marvel to behold and adore, Herod could only imagine in his birth the rise of a new threat to himself.

Most of us upon seeing a baby even today still react like the Magi—we do not analytically observe, we behold, in fact we literally reach out to hold it, or at least touch it. The magi's gifts speak to this. Gold, frankincense and myrrh, these were gifts fit for a king, but they were so because they enhance the senses. The sparkle of gold, the sweet

fragrance of frankincense and myrrh. They draw our attention to what lies before us, they immerse us in the moment.

People tend to see babies in a way that we don't see others. They too draw our attention and immerse us in the moment. We think babies are beautiful, all of them, without exception. Why is that? People can be plain, even ugly, but babies, they are all beautiful. I think in part its because they are so frail, so helpless, so defenseless—they call forth from us attention and affection. Perhaps they remind us of ourselves. We want others to think we are so strong and in control, but we too need attention, we want to be held, long to be beheld.

So what does it mean that God chose to come among us first as a babe? Not as a white knight at the head of a legion of angels as many at the time imagined the coming of the Messiah, but as a helpless newborn infant, and born in a barn to boot. Perhaps God knows best how to reach us, not by impressing us with his might, but by endearing himself to us by appearing weak and vulnerable. Even today, we may no longer be able to see the stars, but we can still behold babies.

May we behold God, wherever he is, whenever he comes, however he shows himself. May we behold all we see and marvel at what we behold.