

# Sunday Homily

## THE EPIPHANY

3 JANUARY 2021

YEAR B

“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened.”

Matthew 2:3

### Illustration

All mothers are afraid. Fear goes with the territory. As soon as the baby is put in your arms, tiny, helpless, dependent, you know that fear is going to be your constant companion from now on. There is so much that can harm them. Some dangers you can protect them from. But there are illnesses, and accidents, and after a while they grow up and leave home and then they are out there, somewhere, doing who knows what, putting their precious bodies in the way of danger. Always, fear lurks at the back of the maternal mind.

### Gospel Teaching

This mother is no different. First-century Palestine is not the best time and place for a child to be born. Many do not survive. Illness takes some, poverty others. Living under occupation poses its own dangers. This mother has good reason to be afraid for her baby. But here there is extra reason for fear. There is something special about this child, something provoking. This child is not going to live a quiet life out of harm's way, as every mother wishes. This child is going to get himself into trouble.

Already there are signs. The visitors, for example. It is normal, of course, for there to be visitors when there is a new baby in the house. Mothers do not always welcome them. They need time alone to get to know their new child. But still, it is natural for grandparents, aunties and uncles, friends and neighbours, to call in, wet the baby's head, bring gifts and good wishes. It is expected. But this baby receives unexpected visitors, strange and alarming. They are magi from eastern lands, they say, astrologers, scholars of the sky and the stars, of signs and portents. They have seen something in the heavens. They know that a king has been born, and they have come to bow before him. The signs have led them to this place, to this peasant baby and his frightened mother.

On the way, they have met another frightened person. Not a mother, but a king, and one who has seen a threat. The magi have gone first, not so wisely it turns out, to the royal palace to look for their newborn king. There they have met a tyrant, a weak and foolish king, who knows how tenuous is his hold on power, and lives in constant fear of the next rebellion, the next death threat, the poisoner in the corner, the stab in the dark.

The magi bring news of a replacement, perhaps a member of another branch of the family that claims to be royal, perhaps, perish the thought, a descendant of King David, ready to grow up and claim the old kingship, claim to be God's anointed, the Messiah. Yes, Herod is afraid, and fear breeds cunning, and violence. He will find the child, and will kill him, and the magi will unwittingly help.

The magi go on their way, and find the baby. They bring their strange gifts, not things for a baby, but symbols, of royalty, priesthood and death. The child's mother gazes at them, and wishes for a rattle and some flowers, safe and normal gifts. But in her heart of hearts she knows that nothing will ever be normal again. She is afraid, but in her fear there is also thrill. There is new life in the world, and anything could happen.

## Application

Today the Church remembers the visit of the magi and proclaims Jesus as the "light to lighten the Gentiles". We are in a dark time of the year, and look forward to the return of light mornings and evenings. But light is not always benign. Bright light can blind. Intense light can slice through steel. Christ the light illumines and warms, but also judges. His coming brings fear. Herod is right to be afraid. He will have his day of slaughter, but he will not snuff out the light. This is no gentle glow, but a passionate fire that burns the cruel.

The baby receiving the strange visitors with the prophetic gifts will one day be killed by the fear he generates, but even then the light will not be snuffed out. For those who recognise and follow him, fear is mixed with a thrill of excitement. The light will burn eyes and hearts, it will drive out darkness and evil, and reveal God's truth.