

**COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY,
JANUARY 4, 2004 (THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD)**

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The beautiful readings today speak of the manifestation (this is what “epiphany” means) of the Messiah, the awaited Savior of Israel. And it is a manifestation which finally includes the Gentiles, the pagans (non-Jews). The reading from Isaiah is centered on Jerusalem, the city where God dwells. After the exile, she was still in mourning, awaiting her redemption. This is now announced to her, with calls to rejoice, for her light is said to have come; she will be radiant, so that she will shine over nations and kings. Her light will be the Lord himself dwelling in her midst, a light that will never be extinguished. To her shall come her exiled children, and her former oppressors will bring precious gifts, and will pay her (and really, her God, the God of Israel), homage. That day, Jerusalem shall know her God as Savior, and everyone will be righteous. This the Lord will hasten to accomplish in its time.

Psalm 72 is the Messianic psalm par excellence. It is really a prayer for the righteous king, who will govern with justice, taking special care of the poor and helpless. This will also involve the submission of the enemies of the people, symbolized by their bringing tribute and rendering homage to this just King. Thus will the whole earth be renewed, manifested by abundant crops and fruits and flowers.

The profound reading from Ephesians prepares us for the gospel reading. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, speaks of the revelation (in Greek, “apocalypse”) he had from God, which was necessary in order to know a most astounding thing (a “mystery” which we are wont to take for granted): that we Gentiles can now take our place alongside the Jews as God’s people, sharing in the same divine Promises, something which prior generations had not known. (A little earlier in Ephesians it is said that the wall of hatred which divided Jews and Gentiles is now abolished in Christ.)

Matthew places the fulfillment of this hope of Isaiah and the Psalmist right at Jesus’ birth, when his star (see Num 24:14-19) reveals to the magi that the awaited King of the Jews has been born, and these representatives of the Gentiles (who are also

“kings,” according to tradition), come to render homage and bring gifts to the newborn, whom they find with his mother.