

THE WISE MEN

On January 6th we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, the coming of the Wise Men to worship the infant Jesus. No Nativity play is complete without three Kings coming to visit the baby Jesus, bearing their gifts. But where does this story come from? And what is its significance?



worship Jesus, and present him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The story of three Wise Men, or Magi, is told in Matthew, Chapter 2. The story is well known. They see a star telling of the birth of the King of the Jews. They follow the star first to Jerusalem, where they seek the newborn King at Herod's palace, but are directed on to Bethlehem where the star stops to show them where Jesus is. They are overjoyed,

Over the centuries, this basic narrative became enriched by several traditions. Tertullian first referred to them as kings in the second century, and this became general in the sixth century, being linked to *Psalm 72:10-11* which says *The kings of Tarshish and distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.* While Matthew gives no number, Origen in the third century said there were three, probably because of the three gifts, and this too became general. By the sixth century they had been given names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. By the Middle Ages they had become venerated as Saints, and their alleged relics were brought from Constantinople first to Milan, and then to Cologne. A shrine to them can still be seen in the magnificent Cathedral of Cologne. The Magi adoring Christ has always been one of the most popular subjects for religious art, the earliest depiction being a second century fresco in the catacombs of Rome.

But Epiphany is more than just a picturesque story. The gifts have significance: gold showing Christ as King, frankincense Christ as priest, and myrrh Christ as sacrifice. Even more important is that they show that the birth of Christ is good news to Gentiles as well as Jews: that Christ has come to all people, of every nation.