

One of the symbols of this Christmas season is light. Tradition has it that the choice of the date for the celebration of Christ's birth was based on the winter solstice in December and the return of light after the shortest daylight hours. This is why we decorate our homes and Churches with lights to welcome Jesus Christ the light of world.

In our 1st reading, the prophet Isaiah delivers a message of encouragement to the Jewish people, returning to their homeland after years of exile in Babylon. The Lord's light will once more shine on them and even neighboring pagan nations will be attracted, bearing gifts and proclaiming the praises of God.

In the 2nd reading, St. Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, announces that the revealing light of Christ has made these people coheirs with the Jews of God's wonderful promises, especially of eternal life.

The Gospel, from St. Matthew, tells the beautiful and intriguing story of the visit of the magi to the Christ child. These magi or astrologers, wise men from the East, Gentiles, also were led to Christ by the light of a heavenly star.

They were not thwarted by the darkness of the paranoid King Herod who sought to eliminate all possible rivals to his power. Nevertheless, Herod, after consulting with the priests and scribes, directed the magi to Bethlehem, the ancestral town of King David, from whence the Messiah was to be born.

When they finally arrived where Jesus was, led by the light of the star, Matthew tells us that they prostrated themselves, i.e. lay down before him and did him homage. Then they presented the gifts they had brought: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These gifts are mainly symbolic. Gold recognizes Christ as a king. Frankincense indicates that he is God. Myrrh, a soothing anointment, is a sobering reminder that he will suffer in accomplishing his mission.

When we were baptized and became disciples of Jesus, we were presented with a lighted candle with a prayer that we were enlightened by him to walk and live in the light of faith.

This light of faith within us can burn brightly and enlighten and warm us and lead us to the eternal light. For this to happen requires our cooperation, our willingness to live a life of virtue, to keep the Lord's commandments, to honor him in our prayers and participation in the sacraments. It means that we strive to serve one another in charity, to forgive hurts we inflict on each other, and that we be mindful and caring for all in need. These are gifts which we bring to Christ in exchange for his gift of himself to us, his saving love and promise of life in abundance now and forever.

Of course, we know all too well, the darkness of evil and selfishness around us, and sometimes even within us. May we let the bright and warm light of faith shine forth and always lead us to Christ.