

The Epiphany of the Lord
(Isaiah 60:1-6 / Matthew 2:1-12)
06.01.2016

Today we think of the Magi whom we have come to call the *Three Wise Men*, although the exact number of those who came to pay homage to the Lord is never actually mentioned in the Scriptures. What has led us to think in terms of *three* wise men are the three gifts we are told the Magi offered to Jesus: gold, frankincense and myrrh. These three gifts could have been offered by two men or by twelve. It doesn't really matter.

That we are not given the precise number of the Magi is immaterial, we could say ... Or is it? Maybe it does matter is that we aren't told the exact number of the wise men who came to pay homage to the Christ-child, for this leaves room for us to be counted among their number.

At the end of the day, it is *a whole host of people, a vast throng made up of every tribe, tongue, people and nation* who have been called to find and take their place among those who kneel before the King of the Universe lifted up upon the Throne of the Lamb, the same One who humbled Himself to come among us as the helpless infant of Bethlehem, *wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger*.

The idea of us coming before the Lord today and offering our gifts is captured for us in a prayer of the Church's liturgy: the *Prayer Over the Gifts* which is used at the Vigil Eucharist of the Epiphany. Therein we read: *Accept, we pray, O Lord, our offerings in honour of the appearing of Your Only Begotten Son and the first fruits of the nations, that to You praise may be rendered and eternal salvation be ours.*

We are called to offer our gifts and talents, the things we are good at, the ways in which God has blessed us, the great riches and small means available to us, all the things we do and by which we help others, our lives' simple pleasures, our joys and our laughter, our hopes and our dreams, what we are and what we would like to be ... in the words of that simple hymn sung in many parish settings, we are called to express ourselves to God in this way: *All that I am, all that I do, all that I'll ever have, I offer now to You.*

We are also called to offer to God our poverty, our weakness, our wounds, our suffering, our pain, our tears, our sadness, the things we do wrong and the things that no matter how hard we try we just don't ever seem to manage to get right.

We are called to offer to God what we are not yet, including that which we will never be. To offer all we have means that we should willingly offer what we do not have as well ... all that is lacking in our lives.

We are even called to offer to God – certainly, in the sense of letting go of it, for Him – our sin.

Now there's a real challenge for most of us! How many of us are willing to lay down our sin before the Lord and leave it there?!

On this day we are called to meet with the Great King of the Universe at the crib and marvel there at His being born in weakness. As we look to Him in the Nativity scene, we are invited to remember that He has chosen to share in our fragile human condition, so that He may, in this humble way, reveal all God's glory to us and, at the same time, reveal to us our own dignity as the children of His Father who is also our Father. (In the post-resurrection meeting with Mary of Magdala, Jesus speaks of His Father being our Father: *I go to My Father and your Father.*)

We are called to draw from our encounter with Christ in today's feast the strength we need for life's journey.

The journey theme is an important one in the mystery we celebrate today.

The wise men not only travelled to Bethlehem (taking a difficult path and making an arduous trek),

they also made an onward journey. They travelled further still. We are told that they set out in a new way from the place of their encounter with Jesus. Not only did these travellers change course, they themselves also changed within. It was precisely the transforming power of their encounter with Christ that brought about this change within them: the conversion that took place in their hearts.

Just as the Magi had been led to Jesus by the light of a star and guided on to a new path through the insight given to them in their meeting with the Christ-child, so we are called to be led and guided by the light of the gospel which on so many plans and at so many levels challenges us to change our ways, to adopt a new course, to adjust our lives, to espouse fresh attitudes of heart.

The Offertory Prayer at the day Eucharist of this feast (the one we will use in this celebration) comes in with the following insight about what we have to offer Christ today when it reads: *Look with favour, Lord, we pray on these gifts of Your Church in which are offered now not gold, or frankincense or myrrh, but He who by them is proclaimed, sacrificed and received, Jesus Christ.*

It is Jesus Christ whom we carry within us, whom we are called to offer today.

What we are called to offer is something much more personal than gifts exterior to ourselves (the things we possess) but who and what we are.

Who and what we are, by virtue of our baptism, is nothing less than Christ! It is Christ we are called to offer to the Father and to the world!

The early Christians' greeting acclamation to the newly baptised comes to mind on this Baptismal Feast (for, as an antiphon of the Church's liturgy reminds us, today we celebrate three mysteries: Christ's manifestation to the Magi at Bethlehem, His manifestation on the Banks of the Jordan at His Baptism and His Manifestation at Cana in Galilee, where He changed the water into wine). That greeting acclamation to the newly baptised declared: *You are Christ!*

We are Christ!

It is Christ whom we have to offer: Christ in us ... Indeed, the Christ we are! For, by virtue of our baptism we are all an *alter Christus, another Christ*. This term *alter Christus* which has come to be associated more specifically with those ordained to ministry in the Church was originally applied to every Christian. Every baptised person is *another Christ*.

It is our faith, our hope and our love – these God-given gifts – that we are called to offer.

We are called to offer today what Christ offered to us and still wants to offer through us: His very life.

A poet helps us grasp what this might mean when he writes:

See!

In His hands are gifts of wisdom's gold and sacrificial love, bought dearly on a cross.

New life with wealth untold He offers, in exchange for our impoverished dross.

At the very centre of what we are called to offer is what we have received in and from Christ Jesus: in a word, love!

While the Prologue of St John's gospel speaks of us having received *grace upon grace* through Christ's incarnation, I believe we can think and speak of our celebration of the Epiphany as a call for us to offer love in exchange for love.

If this day is reserved in many cultures as the feast day when people exchange gifts among themselves, their exchange of gifts is a reflection of what we are all really called to celebrate in the mystery of the Epiphany: a wonderful exchange of gifts with the Lord.

In return for the gift of His life given to us and for us, we are called to make an offering of our lives to and for Christ. (The offering of our lives to and for the Lord will always include a dimension of

gift of ourselves to and for others, as well, of course.)

Again I resort to a poet's way of expressing what we are about as we celebrate this feast and the offering it requires of us.

*Instead of incense, Blessed Lord, if we can send a sigh of fervent prayer to Thee
Instead of myrrh, if we can but provide tears that from penitential eyes do slide
And though we have no gold; if for our part we can present Thee with a broken heart.
Thou wilt accept; and say those Eastern Kings
Did not present Thee more precious things*

Today, in spirit, we bring our gifts to the manger and for some of us it is merely our broken selves we have to bring. But, that is no mean gift to offer!

It may surprise us to know that the most precious, beautiful and useful gift any of us can offer to the Lord are our broken hearts.

What makes me say this?

Well, a broken heart is a heart that knows what it means to love; it is a heart that knows what it means to feel compassion; it is a heart that knows what it is to experience the pain of another.

The symbol of a broken heart is the great symbol of a truly loving heart. It is the great symbol we retain of Christ's costly love expressed most wonderfully upon the cross.

One of the last images of Jesus we are left with is that of a man with a broken heart, an open heart wounded by love, from which pour forth both blood and water.

It may seem strange to some of us to hear Oscar Wilde quoted in a homily, but I believe this insight of his really is worth sharing. Wilde poses the question – or is it not that he gives us the answer when he writes: *How else but through a broken heart may the Lord Christ enter in?*

Just as the Magi did when they left Bethlehem, we are called to go away from our celebration today, not only ready to change course, but transformed within ourselves, converted, turned around, renovated each one in our self.

We are called to go forth from this place with a heart open to all.

The Solemnity of the Epiphany has always been seen as a great missionary feast. Missionary Congregations often mark it in a special way and there has grown up a kind of tradition in the Church of ordaining Bishops for Missionary Territories on this date.

We will be sent out from this celebration today (as, indeed, from every Eucharist) with a mission confided to us. We will be sent forth to *announce the gospel of the Lord* and to *glorify the Lord by our lives*.

That mission we are called to fulfil by sharing our gifts with others in simple ways.

I believe that our *presents* to the Lord can be simply our *presence* to others.

Our gifts/our *presents* for Christ can be our *presence* to people feeling vulnerable, our *presence* to the troubled, disheartened, neglected folk known to us or yet to be encountered.

Let me end by sharing with you a prayer from the Celtic tradition.

In the light of what I shared with you in this morning's reflection on the great mystery of the Epiphany we celebrate, I suggest that each one of us make this prayer his or her own, while praying it in communion with each other, for like the Magi we are not meant to travel alone, but with others, companions on the journey.

So, let us pray:

High King of the universe

We offer You our possessions, make them all your own.

We offer You our mind-sets and we place them at Your feet.

May we be filled with Your presence as incense fills a holy place.

*We offer You the shadow of our lives, the things that are crushed;
Our little deaths and our final death.
May these be like the straw in the out-stable.
May something beautiful for You be born in all this straw.*

Amen!