

The Epiphany of the Lord
(Isaiah 60:1-6 / Matthew 2:1-12)
06.01.2017

Today's commemoration of the Epiphany is a reminder to us of the Church's mission *ad gentes*. We should never forget that Christ has confided a mission to us in regard to all the peoples of the earth. The nations of the world are represented by the foreign sages we encounter in today's gospel story. These *wise men* came to pay homage to the Infant Jesus, each one bringing to Christ their own particular gift.

It is surely significant that these outsiders to Judaism were seen to have something to offer to the One whose manifestation in the world *His own* did not recognise or acknowledge.

It is important for us today as Church to understand what we see going on here.

Christ who came into this world to offer salvation not only to His own but to all, from the very outset, began by graciously receiving what gentile people had to offer to Him.

As Church we can think that we have much to offer to those beyond our fold – and, no doubt, we have – but, if we are to follow Christ's own example, we must also learn to begin, as the gospels show us Jesus did, by graciously receiving what people beyond the Church have to offer to us.

St Paul speaks of welcoming and rejoicing in *whatever is good, whatever is noble, whatever is wise* in cultures other than our own – and surely that includes the good which is there in religious cultures which are other than our own.

An openness to recognise what is good in religious cultures other than our own can mean for some of us, who have little experience beyond our own particular Church, a recognition and welcoming of what other Christian traditions have to share with us for our benefit. At the level of ecumenical contact, the reciprocal sharing of gifts is vital. Each ecclesial community has something to offer to all the others as well as something to receive from them. But things don't end there. We are called to widen our horizons further still; we are called to dare to go beyond ecumenical meeting into encounter at an inter-religious level.

There is much good in the various religious traditions and cultures to be found in our world to which we as Church would do well to pay heed. There is a lot we can receive from others.

Again I insist that it is part of the Church's mission not only to give, but also to receive.

When Christ sent His disciples out to spread the Good News He invited them to humbly accept whatever those who welcomed them had to offer. We must do what the disciples were bidden to do.

By our reception of what others have to offer to us we can awaken within those who give an appreciation of the gifts they already carry within themselves and thus lead them to recognise from whence these gifts come: our God, the One whom the Christian Scriptures call *the giver of all good gifts*.

Since all that is good comes from God, the good which is already there in others is God-given. It should be respected and welcomed by us Christians as a blessing which has been given to us through them from the One we confess as *the One Lord and God of all*. The One True God works in and through the meditation of all those in whom *the good* is apparent.

The gospel tell us that **having paid homage to the Lord the foreign sages returned to their own land by a different way.**

Not only did the foreign sages change their route, they were also changed within themselves. The encounter of the Wise Men with the humility of God which was made manifest in Christ-Jesus brought about change within these sages; it transformed them.

If only our encounter with Christ's divine majesty – which is made manifest most clearly in Jesus' humility – wrought similar change in us! If only we all went away from our meetings

with Christ in prayer changed persons!

Sometimes, as Church, we can be blind to the humility of our God which Jesus reveals to us in the stable of Bethlehem, while those from outside the Christian fold see it clearly and are more readily impacted by it.

Let's admit it, we can meet with the Lord in prayer – in the Church's sacraments, for example, just as we are doing right now, having come together to celebrate Eucharist – and yet go away from these privileged encounters with God's grace as if nothing has happened. There is no evident change in our lives.

Why is this?

I suggest that the danger is for us to have become so used to meeting with the Lord that we grow indifferent to the transforming grace this encounter should operate within us.

I am sure many of you will have heard ordinary Christian folk say of persons of other religions that they are really very Christian. Whatever might be criticised in this statement, I believe it also contains a great truth – a greater truth than we might, at first, accord to it. I believe this statement bears witness to a profound spiritual intuition. It reveals that it has been given to those who make such a remark that they recognise Christ to be present and at work in men and woman beyond the Christian fold. This accords with Christian teaching. Christ is everywhere present. We believe that Christ is in every person we encounter – whether or not that person is explicitly Christian. As Paul put it, writing to the Colossians: *There is only Christ. Christ is everything. Christ is in everything.*

To hold to this belief has many implications for us. It should lead us to genuine respect for everyone and everything.

The most important element in the story retained in the liturgy of the Western Church is the particular gifts brought by those who came to pay homage to the Lord.

The liturgy sees the magi's gesture of offering of gifts to be an invitation addressed to us to follow their example. We are called to pay homage to the Lord by bringing our gifts and presenting them to Christ. This implies that we begin by recognising that we have gifts to offer. We must try to discover just what these gifts might be. It befalls us to attribute whatever our particular gifting might be to the One whom the Bible calls *the giver of all good gifts*. Ultimately, whatever is good within us comes from God. St Benedict insists on this point in his Rule for Monks when, echoing the psalmist, he tells us that *whatever good we see in ourselves we should immediately attribute to the Lord, saying in our hearts: Not unto us, not unto us, but unto your name be the glory, O Lord*. Whatever glory is ours as human beings comes from God's much greater glory which is made manifest in some small way in and through our lives. Our gifts stem from the Lord's blessing bestowed upon us.

As I suggested a moment ago, the offering of our gift to the Lord presupposes an awareness on our behalf of the ways in which we have been gifted. I wonder if any of us are ever sufficiently aware of the ways in which God's blessings are to be evidenced in our lives. I suspect that even those who think they know what their particular gift is get this wrong. Sometimes what we imagine to be our special gift is not our real gift at all. On the other hand, it happens that something that we don't see as a gift in any shape or form – indeed, something we might perceive to be a lack or a weakness in our lives – is precisely what the Lord has graced us with to keep us grounded in His service and to help make of us a source of blessing for others. Most of us fall short of recognising just how good the Lord has been – just how good the Lord is – in our regard.

At this point **let us look at the particular gifts the wise men offered**. We do this in order to consider what we are called to offer to the Lord. Ideas are given to us when we examine in essence just what it was that these foreign sages first brought before the Christ-child to

express their homage to Him. **The men from the East came with gold, frankincense and myrrh.** These gifts which were accepted to the Christ-child prefigure what humanity is called to offer to the Lord of heaven and earth for all time. It is not so much the gifts themselves that matter, but what they symbolise.

Gold is that which of lasting value. *Invest in gold and don't worry about the fluctuations of market* is what gold sellers advocate. We might ask: what our gold is; what it is that has a lasting quality and is of permanent value in our lives. St Paul tells us what this is when he writes: *All may pass away, but love endures forever.* Love is of lasting value. *Love endures forever.* True love never dies. Since *God is love*, whenever true love is at work in our lives its source and end is in God. The point to grasp is that the Lord Himself has given us whatever love is in us. Christ gave Himself for us out of love. He calls us to love in our turn. We are to love as Christ first loved us: with a self-giving, sacrificial love. The Letters of St John, which we have listened to throughout the Christmas season, make the point that we return God's love by reflecting it to others. To really make the gift of gold is to make a present of our love. It is to dare to give what we hold most precious: our life. We make this present by our presence to others – by giving them our time, being there with and for them when they need us.

Frankincense offered acknowledges God to be God. Frankincense is as an offering to the praise and glory of God. What is our frankincense? Paul would tell us that this is our lives. What he writes by way of exhortation to the Romans holds true for us: *Offer your lives as a living sacrifice of praise to the glory of God.* St Irenaeus reminds us that *the glory of God is the human person fully alive.* The implication here is that we truly honour and pay fitting homage to the giver of all life by living our lives to the full. How many of us can honestly say that we do that? I suspect most of us are living our lives to a somewhat lesser capacity than we could and should. Most of us have many talents that we ignore and/or fail to release. Talents are not meant to be hoarded, they are not meant to be left buried in the earth; rather they should be developed and made fructify. The challenge for us is to do the very best with what we have been given – be it small or great, little or much. As the gospel parable of the distribution of talents reminds us, this involves us daring to take risks and that demands of us trust in the One who has endowed us with the talents He has bestowed upon us.

The final gift mentioned in the gospel story of the magi is myrrh. This is a hard gift to offer generously, for **myrrh represents suffering and death.** No one can escape suffering and no one can escape death. We are all faced with these harsh realities – not only our own suffering and death, but the pain of those close to us. Our Christian tradition teaches us that for the followers of Jesus all suffering has a value when it is united to the suffering of the Lord. Our pains, our sorrows, and even our deaths, can become a generous offering of love for others. Our accompaniment of and communion with others who are in pain, our compassion for those going through sorrow and distress, constitutes our love-offering to them, our prayer with and for them.

In faith we suffer with Christ, sharing in His passion and death. We do this when we endure pain in our own lives or stand close to others who are traversing distress in theirs.

Let me conclude our Epiphany meditation by sharing with you a prayer written by the Reverend Ray Simpson, an Anglican priest – former warden of Lindisfarne. It is a simple prayer which captures and expresses in a quasi-poetic prayer formula what I see this Solemnity of the Epiphany calling us to live.

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 shadows 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.