

Epiphany (C)
(Isaiah 60:1-6 / Matthew 2:1-12)
06.01.2019

Last year I heard a Muslim scholar translate the word *Epiphany* as *surprising realisation*. To be perfectly honest, I can't remember what this Imam went on to say, but his translation of the word *epiphany* came back to me as I prepared to celebrate today's feast. We are more used to hearing *epiphany* rendered *manifestation*. What the Muslim teacher's translation draws to our attention is the *really surprising* way by which the Lord manifested Himself to our world. I would go as far as to say that we simply don't 'get' the Christian message until we come to recognise the *really surprising* ways whereby the Lord our God continues to reveal Himself to us. If the Lord's *Epiphany* is a *surprising realisation*, we must ask ourselves if we are ready for and open to God's unexpected interventions in our lives? The Jewish People were waiting for a very different kind of Messiah than Jesus turned out to be. The way God came to His Chosen People in His Only Begotten Son took them completely by surprise. Among the astonishing things about God's coming into the world in Christ-Jesus is the fact that it was foreign sages who recognised Him for who and what He was, while the religious authorities and theologians of His own People failed to do so. The Lord continues to take us by surprise. One of the Lord's big surprises is to reveal the essence of what He is about to people beyond the number of the *Churched* and, even more than that, to manifest Himself to our world through those who might be considered *outsiders*. It happens that there where the Church is failing to have an impact, good people, in whom God is at work, are accomplishing His saving action by their charitable gestures. Sometimes these people offer a more eloquent testimony to God's goodness than the theological discourse certain Christians formulate. It happens that persons who are not explicitly Christian reveal to their brothers and sisters in humanity, through their kindness, generosity and loving mercy, insights into the heart of God that are more convincing than the God-talk of those who pride in calling themselves Christians.

Might I suggest that one way of discerning the manner by which the Lord continues to reveal Himself in our world through those who are not of *the household of our faith*, to use an expression employed by the apostle, is to look at the gifts the *Magi* brought to the Christ child to pay Him homage?

Gold.

Gold stands for prosperity.

There are many instances in which non-believers use their riches more effectively than confessing Christians do. Christians do not necessarily relate to wealth in the best possible way; they do not necessarily use it for the good of others in ways that they could.

Prosperity is something we all want; it is something that is good, but, for that to be the case, we have to relate to it properly – in freedom of heart... otherwise we get it wrong. There is always a danger that our prosperity can turn out to be bad for us. This happens when it becomes the *be all and end all* of our lives.

While money can buy many things it cannot buy love; it cannot buy truth and it cannot buy eternity; riches accumulated simply cannot fill the heart. There are some rich people who will just never have enough. In their greed they reveal themselves to be very poor at a deepest level of their being, despite their hefty bank accounts.

Would you believe me if I were to say that I have met more than one person who has told me that one of the causes of their great unhappiness and discontent in life has been/is their prosperity? I really have! I can think of one man who has been suffering from deep-seated

anxiety for years; he explained to me once that he knows this ill to be rooted in his material wealth... and yet he finds himself unable to share his riches with anyone. There is nothing to hinder him from sharing his riches around him. He could distribute some of his wealth to needy causes, to charities, to family, to friends... but he doesn't. He is too insecure to be able to give anything to anyone. To start with, he says that he is fearful others will realise that he is rich. The man I am talking about would be taken by many people to be a devout person and he probably thinks of himself as a fervent believer. Evidently, I am not going to pronounce on this man's fervour; I am not going to say whether or not his devout practices really please God, but I can share with you what he has said to me. He has told me that he is not a happy man. For me that puts a question mark over his religion. There is something wrong with joyless religion. Pope Francis is continually reminding us of this. For him joyless religion is not good. I believe the unhappiness of the man I refer to is due in no small part to his failure to have ever shared with anyone in any real way the riches he has – and, more than that, the person he is. I am sure he would find greater joy in his life if he were to share with others just some of the wealth he has amassed over the years – and dared to give something of himself to others in doing so.

In contrast to this somewhat sad and stingy religious man, there are happy philanthropists in our world – many of these are not men and women of faith, but they are people who nonetheless reveal the generosity and kindness, care and compassion, love and consideration of our God towards others who are less fortunate than themselves. In such generous folk we see what could be called *true divine charity* magnificently displayed. These philanthropists need not be people who distribute millions of pounds; they can be people who have little monetary riches to offer, but who share with others whatever they have. We have all met such people and been blessed by them: simple, generous folk. We find them in our families, communities, neighbourhoods, friendship circles. There is a wisdom in these folk's generosity.

The wisdom of the foreign sage who carried gold to Bethlehem was such that he knew what really mattered in life. This man grasped that it wasn't that he held in hand that mattered most. This wise man knew that real happiness is not found by clinging to one's gold, but in offering something of one's riches to the less fortunate in their need. In the story we see how the first sage's charity went to where it was needed: to a young couple starting out in life under harsh circumstances. This man's offering was not made in the form of an endowment fund attributed to an illustrious academic institute in a bid to keep his name alive after him. No. The first Mage's gold went directly to where it was required: to alleviate the poverty of a needy family.

Frankincense.

What can incense be seen to represent? What we have in this gift offered might be thought of as the practice of religion. Incense is used in worship. (We used incense in our opening procession; we will use it again at the Offertory of this Eucharist.)

Just like prosperity, religious observance and the maintenance of a religious spirit can also be considered a blessing; something good. But, here too we must pay attention. Even strict religion and firm commitment to religious practice can be missing out on what is essential to the true worship of God which is the attitude of one's heart displayed in the practice of justice and integrity in life.

Empty religiosity will never nourish or satisfy a soul. Extravagant liturgies may be aesthetically pleasing and yet not win favour in the Lord's sight, because, with much outward show, true worship – that which comes from the heart – can be missing. How many prophetic statements have been made which emphasise this point! More than once the Lord made it known to His people that their solemn liturgies and empty sacrifices did not please Him.

Again – as with the bearer of gold – the sage who carried incense to Jesus was not a pious Jew, but rather, someone of another religion; he was a foreigner, an outsider. He was not a member of God’s People – not *one of the club*, if I can put it that way. And yet this *holy man* from an entirely different culture and religion pleased the Lord God of Israel, whose own priests ignored the Christ sent to them.

The point I want to make is that while the practice of religion and/or commitment to scholarship – including theological research – may be good; of itself, this approach to God does not suffice.

We have to move beyond it to the point the sage from the Orient evidently attained. This man came to the *surprising realisation* that in the mess of an outhouse, in the weak and powerless child of Bethlehem, the divine majesty He had been searching for was to be found. The man from the East found in Jesus the answer to his lifelong quest for wisdom. Just as we saw how prosperity – a full pocket – cannot satisfy one’s heart’s desire, so an accumulation of religious virtue or of theological learning, of themselves, won’t bring fulfilment either. What the sage who knelt before the Christ-child to offer incense discovered was divine majesty in a human person. The Mage realised that God had come into this world as an infant: one who was vulnerable and poor, weak and powerless. The wise man who had travelled far to pay homage to Christ was drawn into the sense of mystery which the infant in the manger exuded – an awesome majesty enhanced by the stark simplicity of the stable wherein it was revealed. As this great Eastern thinker knelt before the infant in the feeding trough, he was filled with wonder; he was awestruck in a way that no amount of theory, even high theological speculation, could ever have procured. This wise man’s heart’s desire was nourished as never before. The bearer of incense discovered in the small, the vulnerable and the fragile – in the babe born of Mary – the most wonderful sign of God’s presence ever revealed to the human race.

Myrrh

The sage who brought and presented myrrh to the child who had just been born introduced a note of realism into the outhouse in Bethlehem. This man’s gift represented something we have all experienced in our lives: I am referring to the sadness of death. If someone here has not yet experienced this harsh reality, let me assure you that one day you will.

It is unusual for death to be alluded to before a new born baby. People prefer to concentrate only on being happy at the time of a birth; they don’t know too easily how to cope when the stark reality of suffering is there as part of the story from the outset. The third wise man did. This sage had an intuitive understanding that suffering would be part of the Christ-child’s life – Simeon’s prophecy heard at the Presentation of the child in the temple will go on to confirm this. What Simeon said to Mary was also shot through with realism. Once again we are brought into the domain of what my Muslim contact hints at when translates *Epiphany* as a *surprising realisation*. In the stable of Bethlehem the point is made that death is part of life. An early death would be Christ’s lot; His life before His death would never be a bed of roses. The crown of thorns placed on His head in His Sacred Passion could be thought of as the many thorns that He endured as He journeyed through life now all woven together and brought back to mind. Jesus’ cross was present in His story long before the hours He spent on Golgotha. The swaddling clothes in which He was wrapped hint at his shroud. (Look at the icon of the Nativity of Jesus and compare it with an icon of the resurrection of Lazarus and you will see that the bodies of the new born infant and the deceased Lazarus are wrapped in the same binding cloths.)

If the *Prayer over the Gifts* in this Eucharist will speak of the actual gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh no longer being what is offered to the divine majesty here present,

but rather Him whom these acknowledge and represent – Christ the King Himself, I think we also have to see that what we are called to bring and offer to the Lord in this morning's celebration is ourselves, our lives as they are.

We are called to present to the High King of the Universe, who really takes us by surprise in the Infant Jesus, born in the humble condition in which He came into our world, the following: whatever we can share with the needy; true worship of mind and heart which alone is pleasing to the Lord (worship accompanied by right living in justice, with consideration for others); and those death passages that are required of us as we pursue our journey on the way of Christian discipleship.

It seems appropriate to conclude this reflection today by sharing with you a prayer I came across some years ago and kept a record of.

High King of the universe

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

We offer You our mindsets and we place them at Your feet.

May we be filled with Your presence as incense fills this 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.

May we come to the *surprising realisation* that the One who lies in the hay longs for only one thing from us and that is that we allow Him to be born again and again and again in the humble straw of our lives.

As we pray for the grace to appreciate the *marvellous manifestation* of *God made man* in the child of Bethlehem, let us implore that we may given that insight which discerns the beauty and grandeur of God revealed not only in infant-Christ, but also in our own lives, just as they are – often poor and sometimes quite messy.

Epiphany is a great missionary feast. May Christ, who is alive and active in our lives, and who awaits for us to encounter Him afresh in this liturgy, be the mission we bring forth from this place to share with others. May the *surprising realisation* of Christ's *epiphany* welcomed in our hearts lead us to become in our turn *revelations* or *manifestations* in His life in this world.