

Epiphany

7th January 2024

'Letting the Good News out'

Is 60: *Nations come to your light*

Ps 71: *Before Him all kings shall fall prostrate*

Eph 3: *pagans now share the same inheritance*

Mt 2: Magi . . . gifts of gold, frankincense & myrrh.

For some months after university, and before I began at seminary, I worked over in east London at 'Providence Row,' near Liverpool St station, a project run by the Sisters of Mercy for the homeless. I worked in the section called St Crispin's, a hostel for 16 men rehabilitating after life on the street; it was their crucial first 'step-up' from the street, and a life-saver. The hostel was run very firmly by Sr Moira Keane; the residents knew they couldn't mess with her, and they respected her. And I remember her telling me once the quickest way to let all the chaps in the hostel know a piece of news: she would tell one of them in private and say that it was a secret and that it mustn't be repeated. Because she knew that what was mentioned in secret would spread like wildfire, and in no time at all they'd all have heard the news!

The Epiphany is about the leaking out of the good news that God wants us to hear! We have spent the last

two weeks celebrating Christmas, the birth of Jesus, 'in house,' in the Churches and in our Chaplaincy, and in our family homes. Of course that actual day of our Lord's birth was a very quiet one: just Mary and Joseph, amid the dust and hay of a stable; later on a few shepherds from the local hillside, who'd heard the angels' announcement.

But Epiphany — today's feast — is the celebration of the *opening up* of the news of Christ's birth to the outside world. Not just a few ordinary shepherds from nearby; now there are the "we three kings of Orient are"! Well, we don't know that there were "three"; and we don't know that they were "kings" either; but whoever they were, these Magi, they were coming from afar to see the Christ-child: exotic foreigners, rich stargazers from the east, Zoroastrian astrologers or pagan priests, perhaps, from Ancient Persia! What brought them? Just what was this "star rising" which drew them? We don't really know that either. Astronomers have searched ancient records and done calculations. Every year there seems to be a new hypothesis about quite what the 'star of Bethlehem' was.

Was it a comet? An end-of-life star exploding as a supernova? Probably it was a remarkable series of planetary conjunctions at some point in the last decade BC; there are a number of options. Well, something written in the heavens drew these intelligent men of leisure hundreds of miles to come and ask at the court of Herod what the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, had to say about the birth of a new king. And when they learn that *Bethlehem* was to be the Messiah's birthplace, on they then go to worship Jesus there. And that's the end, I suppose, of the 'quiet period' for Mary & Joseph: the end of the family-only celebration of Jesus's birth: already His great public and universal importance is dawning on them.

It must have seemed extraordinary in some ways to Mary & Joseph, that baby Jesus was being worshipped by these long-travelled, and rich, strangers ... yet this was just the first of many wonders in Jesus's earthly life. The Son of God's presence on earth was indeed a glorious thing, so no wonder, really, that it moved so many, including those from outside the Chosen People of Israel, to have such

devotion to Jesus. The Magi would be the first of many ... and once the apostles went out, after the Resurrection, with the whole message of the Gospel, it was quickly taken up by non-Jews as well as by Jews, as indeed was God's intention from the start.

The Epiphany, then, is the right and fitting consequence of the Christmas season: the culmination of what we have celebrated. It's the closing of our 'family celebration' as Christians — the end of the twelve days of Christmas: now the message of the newborn Christ child has to be taken out to the world. The Son of God's birth as man isn't some 'secret' for us Christians to revel-in in private, but it is news for the whole planet, for every person alive. We have to be very clear about this: Christ is the one and only way to the Father; He is for all people. He isn't 'just one religious leader among many;' no more can we say 'all religions are equal.' This isn't to be arrogant — nor is it any excuse for religious or racial intolerance — but it remains the truth, that all can only be saved in the Son of God. For Christ truly came to save

mankind, not just the one Jewish race. So, for us Gentiles, this is the feast of our salvation! No wonder that in parts of the Church — especially in the east (eastern-rite Catholic, or Orthodox) the Epiphany is celebrated even *more solemnly* than Christmas!

Our Lord came for this: He did not come to remain hidden. He came to make Himself known, despite the danger to Himself in a fallen world, because He knew that many would indeed hear His voice and hearken to His message. Many would fall down in worship of Him, and do Him homage: these He could lead to new life, a life beyond the sins and threats and death in this world. The new-born Jesus is God willing to risk that suffering by entering this world and proclaiming the rightful reign of God. What this all means is that we can't just put Christmas away with the discarded tree and the packed-up Christmas decorations! We can't send Jesus away with the Nativity set into the basement for another year. The joy of Christ born at Christmas is the same joy that sees Christ matured, baptized, preaching, gathering together His

Church and giving His life for us. We have to carry Christ out of the Crib, and holding on to Him accompany Him into the year: as He grows, so we should grow in faith; as He faces the challenges of His earthly life, so should we, with Him to guide us. Let's not pack away the joy of Christmas as the season draws to its close; let's instead ask Jesus to make us joyfully faithful throughout this year, filled with the certainty that drew the Magi hundreds of miles to adore Jesus.

For the Epiphany is all about looking *outward*, not inward — *unpacking*, not packing away! — opening the treasures of our faith up to the world around. The Magi brought gold, incense and myrrh, and these have traditional interpretations: *gold* is fit for a king; *incense* is for honouring the holy God; *myrrh* is to embalm the Christ who will die (young). But perhaps we can think of these gifts in another way, too, as the natural preoccupations of mankind: gold (its concerns over governance & economics); incense (its questions about God); myrrh (its fears of death). They are brought to Jesus by these

Gentiles because *they are all answered in Jesus*: He is the king, poor in this world; He is the divine Son of the eternal God Himself; and He is the one who conquers death. All mankind's worries are answered in Him: these aren't answers just for Christians, but for pagans everywhere; unbelievers in Gower Street; agnostics in your lecture hall and library. Have you told them? Today isn't a day for keeping a secret: today is a day for letting it out of the bag: Christ has come and has come for everyone!

Without Jesus as the star that guides us through life, we are lost, without direction or purpose; but when we see that Jesus's light is the sure guide to what it means to be human, then we can live with a blessed trust. Jesus led the Magi to Himself, so that from the darkness of paganism they could enter into the light of belief. We who live in this same light, must not risk losing the light. We must stay in the light, close to the living Jesus, for we know what awful darkness is out there: the darkness of unbelief, despair, violence and disregard for our fellow man (it's all over the news, every day!). The Magi, then, lead us to

remember and acknowledge the privilege of following the Light, knowing and worshipping Jesus, our giving Him every day and indeed our whole lives.

As we worship the Son of God at this Holy Mass, let's offer Him the gift of this new year 2024, and promise to stay with Him. As we keep this great feast of Epiphany, let's draw ourselves closer in to that scene of the stable, where Jesus is, along with the poor and the rich, the shepherds and the Magi, the saints and the sinners ... Jesus welcomes all, and wants all to know and love Him, and receive from Him the gift that outweighs anything we could ever give: whoever we are, if we truly offer Him our life; then He will gladly offer us eternal life.

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part.
Yet what I can, I give Him: give my heart.*