

## The Epiphany of the Lord

Remarkably, the wise men were lead to Bethlehem by a moving star. It stopped directly over the spot where they were to discover Jesus and his mother. They fell down and worshipped. Today, as we listen to this Gospel from Matthew, the story of Jesus' birth is put into a new framework. Homeless, surrounded by animals and adored by shepherds, today this child influences the solar system as one star stops over the place where he is. Astronomers have developed theories to explain the phenomenon but the search for such theories is in danger of entirely missing the point. In this child is the blueprint and pattern, the wisdom and the power that created the solar system and everything else besides. As St.

John says so beautifully “through him all things came to be and not one thing had its being but through him.”

And there is more. The story of the visit of the wise men to Jesus is designed to remind us of Moses and the events that surrounded his childhood, with a Pharaoh of Egypt who, like King Herod of Judea, was afraid of the threat this child may turn out to become. Pharaoh was right to be afraid because Moses became a great leader who would bring the people of Israel out of the servile clutches of Pharaoh and bring them into freedom and dignity. The story of the wise men proclaims that Jesus is the new Moses who leads all people, not just the people of Israel, and the

whole of creation into the fullness of God's purpose and plan in creation.

The cosmic Jesus and Jesus the Saviour, the one who brings us all to the fullness of life provides the background for the visit we honour and remember today. Coming as they did from the unknown and mysterious, and possibly dangerous, lands of the East, they come as people who did not belong to Israel and who were, in the view of many people in Israel, unlikely to recognize the Messiah, the Saviour, when he came. This privilege was reserved for those who knew about these things, those whom Herod the King called to advise him, the chief priests and the scribes whose task was to enlighten everyone about the coming of the Messiah. The remarkable thing about the

wise men is that they recognized who Jesus was and were delighted to see him. Those who were paid to do the job and who had the wisdom missed the Messiah and did all they could to destroy him as a child but did not manage to do so until he was a young adult.

So what is this saying to us? What is the message of Epiphany, which means the manifestation of who Jesus really was, saying to those of us who honour the Feast today. The starting point has to be that these wise men were outsiders, strangers and therefore seen as a threat by Herod, who was King of the Jews. Jesus was recognized by the non-religious “gentiles” and discarded as a threat and a danger by those who should have known better. As the Gospel unfolds we

see that this is a consistent theme running through the whole life of Jesus. Those who believed and trusted him were not those who read and listened to the scriptures or who observed the religious codes of practice. The ones who came to Jesus and who honoured him were the fragile, the weak, the strangers, the homeless, the sick, the prostitutes, the sinners and those not even worth mentioning in polite society.

There is an implicit criticism of 'religious' people and a warning about turning religion into a kind of personal and community protection programme; a warning about hypocrisy and shallowness of belief and religious observance. But that is not the main point.

Those wise men, in their raw humanity as travellers and seekers after meaning and truth were delighted by the star and did homage to the child. They offered him deeply symbolic gifts which spoke of those vital elements in the human endeavour: power for good, the search for the God of truth and an answer to the mystery and pain of death. In short the amazing message of the Epiphany is that creation and humanity find the message, truth and power that leads to life in Jesus the child of Bethlehem. Jesus is the gift that brings healing, wholeness, justice, peace and hope to every man, woman and child of all times and places. He is the beginning and end of the human search and all time belongs to him.

Therefore, today's feast and celebration defines and gives shape to our existence as religious people and to our faith in Jesus Christ. If Jesus is a gift to delight every human being, the question is this. How are they to know about the gift? Only if those who already have it can share it with them. That is our task and mission.

So how is that mission to take shape?

We are to appreciate deeply, through daily expressed prayer and gratitude, our recognition that we are given the revelation of the greatest possible mystery in Jesus whose body and blood we share.

We are to seize on every opportunity to speak about Jesus to

others and to explain to them his importance to us. And no one is inadequate for the task because we all know him, we all rejoice in the presence of Jesus who is with us all through life.

We are to live our lives so that they are seen to be shaped by our faith and relationship with God. Our relationships with others must be seen to be marked by the same quality of love that God has for us. We are called to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. That means the acceptance of others as gift in themselves and respect for each person's dignity. An outward movement to others marked by warmth, forgiveness and hospitality. There can be no room for the exploitation and manipulation which we can see so often in naked and

dishonest ambition and the gratification of sexual desire at the expense of another. Nor can there be room in our lives for any action or word that damages another person. This rules out gossip or dishonesty of any kind.

We are to be seen as people who live in harmony and peaceful accord with others, with ourselves and with the gifts of creation. People whose lives proclaim the beauty of the words of our psalm: “In his days justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails.”