

## Epiphany 2023 Homily

Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matt 2: 1-12

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We can sum up the message of the Epiphany season with the gospel acclamation for today, which just to remind us, goes like this: Christ was revealed in flesh, proclaimed among the nations and believed in throughout the world.

We start with the journey of the magi, the wise men following the star, a story found online Matthew gospel. This is an Epiphany, a revelation, that the birth of Christ is not just one small step for a local religion but a great leap for all humanity, and the beginning of complete transformation and change for the whole world, and we end the season with Christ's presentation in the Temple where he meets Simeon and Anna who have been expecting him.

The universal significance of the coming of Christ, as a baby in Bethlehem is a particular insight in Matthew's story of the coming of the Magi, which he underlines and emphasises in the Great Commission with which he ends his Gospel, when just before his Ascension, Jesus tells the disciples: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The story of the journey of the Magi, can be seen as just a small part of the story of the birth of Jesus, it is a story of a journey made in faith, through much hardship and difficulty, from distant countries following the star - searching for the new king. It is also the story of the fear that ruled the life of King Herod, terrified always that he would lose his throne to another, and that fear, led to the other story of the tragedy of the massacre of the Innocents. Already the shadow of the cross falls over the new life of the Christ child. Whose story so soon resembles many of our stories in the lives of human societies.

It is the story of the wisdom that led the wise men to return home by another route, just in case Herod's fear meant their destruction as well that of the children. And which led Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt to protect the child, when Joseph had a dream of danger, as soon as the wise men had left.

As told by TS Elliott, in his poem the journey of the Magi, it is the story of lives disrupted and totally changed, not necessarily in comfortable ways, by the arrival of Emanuel, God with us, and by their recognition of him. There are always consequences it seems, to new discoveries.

So we are not just celebrating a one off event or revelation, but the start of the unfolding of an incremental process, a growing in understanding of who Christ is and what it means that God, in him, is with us, that the coming of the Messiah is not just for the Jews 2000+ years ago, but for all people in all times.

Isaiah prophesied the gathering together of people from everywhere, and the restoration of the dispossessed and excluded. He speaks of God's ability to remake our fractured world, and to reconcile on earth what has already been reconciled in heaven. A glorious vision on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is not yet the vision we find in the way of the cross, where the divine power shows itself in the willing acceptance of weakness, suffering and death. A new world on the same lines of the old, just with different people in the same sort of oppressive power, is not what we believe God has in mind, so we need to take care where and how we commit our energies in building the kingdom of God here on earth.

St Paul writing to the Ephesians speaks of the mystery, no longer hidden, of God's infinite prodigal generosity and grace for all people Jews and Gentiles alike. Everyone has the same need of grace, Gentiles as well as Jews. No one has an inborn right to be an inheritor of God's grace. People, we become heirs only by the grace and mercy of God, and all people are called to the same faith to become sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. And that faith calls each of us to the promise of resurrection life.

From such small beginnings in a stable, when the angels sang, the whole world will be turned upside down.

In technical language, it's a mystery that is hard to grasp, but simply stated, when Christ assumes our human nature, he redeems the whole of humanity, and when the fullness of God's divinity comes to dwell in the fullness of Christ's humanity, then the image of God referred to in Genesis, that image in which all men and women were made, is now restored for all time.

It is the inclusivity of the Epiphany, in all its manifestations and workings out that is so critical, no one is excluded from God's unconditional love in Christ Jesus.

It will not as TS Elliott reminds us, be an easy journey:

“A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.”  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot

There are always consequences often unforeseen it seems, to new  
discoveries. Amen