

HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY  
6 JANUARY 2019

In today's Gospel, which we know so well, wise men come from the east, guided by a star, seeking the new born king. It is as Isaiah prophesied 'Above you the Lord now rises and above you his glory appears. The nations come to your light and kings to your dawning brightness'. In the opening prayer of the Mass, the guidance of the star is compared to the light of faith, leading us as it did the wise men, to find and worship Christ: 'grant in your mercy that we, who know you already by faith, may be brought to behold the beauty of your sublime glory'.

It is a light in our lives which can burn brightly at times and insistently, but at other times less so. In his first encyclical letter, Pope Francis wrote in section 57 'Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey'. We are given a light, which suffices for our journey, a lamp guiding us in the darkness of the night. We may wish for more but it is what we are given. The guidance of their star did not stop the wise men almost going wrong and right at the end of their journey when they search for the new born King in Jerusalem and in the royal palace. It needs diligent enquiry and close reading of Scripture to tell them they must journey on to Bethlehem. Then they rediscover their star, the recovery of the light of faith, and for them, as it may be for us, 'the sight of the star filled them with delight'.

The end of their journey brings them to contemplation and worship, the beholding of a sublime glory. It is the end we too long for and journey towards. Their instinct is to bring gifts. Isaiah had prophesied gold and incense and the singing of the praise of the Lord. These are the gifts of the wise men, but they add the darker foreshadowing of myrrh. The Prayer over the Offerings of today's Mass speaks of the gifts we bring: 'these gifts of your Church, in which are offered now not gold or frankincense or myrrh, but he who by them is proclaimed, sacrificed and received, Jesus Christ.' We have a sacrifice yet to perform and it is the offering of ourselves in union with our Lord. Jesus only

ever reveals himself in this offering of himself and he only ever guides us to himself by the sufficient light of faith to join us to himself in this holy offering.

TS Eliot's poem 'Journey of the Magi' pictures one of the wise men looking back in old age remembering a hard journey: 'A cold coming we had of it, / just the worst time of the year / for a journey, and such a long journey'. There are tell-tale signs on the way: they come upon 'three trees on the low sky' and in a tavern 'six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver'. In his long-after remembrance, the wise man asks 'were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?' He thinks how birth and death are normally different but '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.'

The other death in which we can be glad is the death of Christ and this, one supposes, is why the wise man describes his visit to the Christ Child as in Eliot's word 'satisfactory'. Like the wise men we are drawn beyond spectating to participation in the mystery by a wonderful exchange, one of the most recurring themes of the Masses of Christmas. So in the preface of today's Mass: 'when he appeared in our mortal nature, you made us new by the glory of his immortal nature' and in the Prayer after Communion which asks that 'we may perceive with clear sight ... the mystery in which you have willed us to participate'.

A birth, a death. And then there is another level again in this deep mystery of Epiphany, which widens to encompass the Baptism of the Lord and the changing of water into wine at Cana. In the Benedictus antiphon at Lauds on this feast day, it is said of the Church's experience of the Epiphany 'Today the Church has been joined to her heavenly bridegroom, since Christ has purified her of her sins in the river Jordan, the wise men hasten to the royal wedding and offer gifts: the wedding guests rejoice since Christ has changed water into wine'.

I think to say the least this is a strange passage: firstly for example there seems no immediate reason to link the wise men, the baptism in the Jordan and the wedding at Cana and then secondly why these particular events, rather than others also, other mysteries. Thirdly, why describe the wise men as hastening to a royal wedding, when nothing in the gospel text, at least on its surface, seems to speak of a wedding?

So here is a deep and intriguing mystery. The wise men appear to come to celebrate a birth of a child, but in their story we detect an ominous foretelling of a death, but then this death is a sacrifice which brings new life. And the new life is indeed new: not in fact any more this earthly life but a wedding feast in heaven to which we are invited not as mere guests, but as ourselves the ones to be married to our Lord and God.