

The Feast of the Epiphany 2024

Today's Feast, the Feast of the Epiphany, celebrates the journey of the Magi (wise men) from a country afar. It is well embedded in church and school nativity plays the world over. Our Kids' Church Magi on the Third Sunday of Advent (17 December) looked resplendent in their costumes. The Feast is based on a journey occasioned by a star rising in the East that will first lead the Magi to King Herod in Jerusalem, the city of peace that knows little peace, and on to Bethlehem, the city of David, where Christmas was cancelled this year because of the war in Gaza, and where the King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born for us.

The carol "It came a midnight clear" captures the anguish of the curse that permeates all of human history well.

But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring; –
Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

Journeys have become common things. Journeys to other lands and their culture. Once journeys were occasional. Now they are very common amongst Western and Far Eastern elites and not only them. What in the past would have been the activity of a few adventurers is now something many participate in and others even indulge in mostly through mass tourism and others by way of elite personalised tours. At the beginning of a new year and after our keeping of

Christmas it is good to remind ourselves on this feast day of the centrality of the Christmas message.

At the heart of Christmas is the belief that God has come to us by becoming one of us, incarnate, by being conceived in and born of a woman. Life begins at conception. There are different ways of expressing this belief as the New Testament makes clear. Paul, the Apostle writes,

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)

John the Evangelist makes the same point memorably in his prologue. “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Epiphany means manifestation. God is manifesting himself. He is making Himself known not only to a people, but to the world. The world is now to come and know God through his manifestation in human form as the second half of verse John 1.14 reminds us, “and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Is this glory of which John the Evangelist writes the glory that brings the Magi to offer their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh each symbolising something of the significance of the child lying before them? Gold for a king. Incense symbolising God's presence and myrrh, the ancient funeral spice, recognizing the mortal human nature of the Son of God, destined to suffer and to die in sacrifice for all mankind.

It must be evident that our celebrations of Christmas, too many sometimes to number, often with little or no depth, are not an end in themselves but the invitation by the Church addressed in the name of God to men and women and children the world over to join us on the journey of Christian faith.

Each one of us is to become a star to the other leading ultimately always to Bethlehem. We can only become a star to the other if we make the true confession, which is not so much made up of words, as some believe, but one of posture briefly captured by Matthew. "On entering the house, the Magi saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Only on seeing him and recognising him does posture follow. A posture that is to define our whole lives including our words. Words have become cheap. Our world is full of words. Our world is full of chatter and twitter. Words no longer mean what they meant. Words now can mean whatever I decide them to mean. Any dialogue and meaningful conversation lies in tatters. The preachers' words are betrayed by the shenanigans of cult Christian leaders. And finally, even our own leaders have become unwise.

We are to pay homage. We too are to bend our hearts and our minds, our ambitions and our desires towards the one who is worthy of our homage. With the Magi we are to open our treasure chests and from these treasure chests we are to offer what is most precious our very lives to God in the service of all made in His glorious image. People everywhere. After all the greatest gift is the gift of life. And maybe even a little day by day across the year the star in us, the star in us, dim as it often is, will shine more brightly so that not only we see the star in us but become this star to others leading them to embark on a journey, and enabled to distinguish a good way from a bad one. To distinguish good turns from bad ones. Think of Herod.

Again, we are to be a star that leads people to embark on a journey of discovery of the depth of the Christian faith. This journey of discovery is not without

hazards, ups and downs, challenges and joys, self-sacrifice and immense growth in understanding. We will return home by another way for the way of Herod and the contemporary ways of the legions of Herods can no longer be ours. Herod has become democratised. Today everyone can become Herod and many, very many want to be. With T. S. Eliot we too will feel uneasy in our today with its isms, which we are told are preferable to Christian believing...

Eliot writes in "The Journey of Magi",

"We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods."

But we will also be able to say with him with conviction,

"And I would do it again." I would embark again.

This journey of faith that always leads to Bethlehem, also always leads us to Golgatha and on to the eternal Easter morning of our believing... "And I would do it again" as we embark on a new calendar year with Christ. **Amen.**