

Homily for Feast of Epiphany 2019

There were two brothers. One grew up very cynical. The other became known for his beautiful art. The first could only see the faults in people and trusted few people, if anyone. The second found beauty and goodness everywhere. Who knows how children can become so different in outlook. People do change however. Think of St Francis of Assisi. He grew up privileged. Yet discovered a vision in the Gospel that changed his life totally. His conversion changed the church as well. Some people like Karl Marx had a vision of history that inevitably would lead, he believed, to a new world order. His ideas influenced the history of the world. But his vision was fatally flawed based as it was on a narrow understanding of the capacity both human nature and of economics. For better or worse we look to people of vision to inspire us when all we are able to see is failure and disaster.

What inspired the magi, the men from the East, to journey to Bethlehem? With the wisdom and knowledge of the stars they saw a new star and followed it. The motto of several Air Forces once was "*Per ardua ad astra*" meaning "Through adversity to the stars". To look to the stars is to have an ambition or quest for something great but which comes at a great cost. The stars do still beckon us as evidenced by the space programs of several nations and the fascination we all have with the night sky that remains so familiar but so far out of reach.

For whatever reason the magi set out on a journey following this star, this intuition, this fascination, this vision. That I suppose is why their story in Matthew's Gospel has sparked the imaginations of people ever since. The idea of a quest, a journey in search of a pot of gold, the holy grail, the fountain of youth or whatever appeals to us. Most of our quests are more mundane. We work for a career, to pass an exam. We save for a car. But to make sense of the ordinary days of our lives we harbour a hope for a more far reaching star to follow. It is a star that demands that we give the time and energy to follow that not all are willing to give.

The magi saw in the star a sign of a new born king. But they found much more than an ordinary king. The star led them to a very ordinary stable and some very ordinary parents. They, though gentiles with little understanding of Jewish Messianic hopes, found a child. In this child they beheld one who not only held the hopes and dreams of the Jews but of all nations. Their story is the whole Gospel in miniature. It presents a Saviour for all the world. This is a saviour that can be found not only by religious Jews but by anyone who is genuinely seeking a hope that makes one free. The magi foreshadow the faith that would be found outside the boundaries of Judaism.

That Gospel message is foreshadowed in the canticle from Isaiah we read. It was composed at a time when the Jews who had been held captive in Babylon were beginning to return to Jerusalem. It is incredibly idealistic. Because the Jerusalem to which they were returning was a shadow of its former self. It had been laid waste. Yet the prophet could see beyond the depressing sight to a transformation. The song is one of rejoicing that in spite of everything that happened they were now free and were coming home. It presents a vision that flies in the face of all that is negative and evil in the world, all that is cynical and pessimistic, all that seeks immediate gratification of our desires. It shows a spark of the light that appeals to us all at different times and different places.

Epiphany invites us to a faith that sees beyond the immediate limitations of our fickle daily mood changes, our personality, our relationships, custom, tradition or politics. It invites us to take the journey with the magi. Put ourselves into the story. Follow the star that leads to the dream that God has for this world. That kind of vision helps keep our balance in our giddy world.

For us that dream we call the Reign of God embodied in an ordinary child. When the magi arrived at Bethlehem their response was one of simple homage. Perhaps if we approach each person, place and event in our lives with the same simple act of reverence we too may behold the Saviour of the world in our midst.

Fr Graham