

Homily for The Solemnity of The Epiphany 2020

I know that I have suggested several times that it is good to read passages of the scriptures as if they were new to us, as if we had never heard them before, because this gives them a new life and a new freshness. Sometimes it can also be good to read a passage from the scriptures as if we were living it for the first time, too. This Gospel story is very familiar to us. The wise men come to Bethlehem, via Jerusalem, worship the infant Christ, and then travel home by a different route. But let's read the passage as if we are living it for the first time. As soon as we start to read the story, a switch in our memory trips and we think 'I know how this ends'. But if we read the passage as if we are living it for the first time, we imagine ourselves into the lives of the wise men. They didn't set out for Bethlehem; they set out to follow the star, wherever it may lead. They didn't know where they were going, they didn't know what kind of a family they would meet, they didn't know that they were going to be dealing with a crafty but insecure ruler, and they didn't know that they were going to have to come home secretly by a different route. Unlike us, they didn't know how the story would play out when they started. They just knew that they had seen a star, and that they had to follow it.

So this is a story of some wise men who catch a glimpse of a delightful mystery, which they feel they have to follow. They do not know where it will lead, or what will happen along the way. Of course, they know that on the journey there will be hardships and discomfort, even doubts about what they are doing, and why. T S Eliot captured this in his poem 'The Coming of the Magi':

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.

The Magi follow a mysterious sign. They know that they are looking for an infant king, but they have no idea of quite what this means. For them it is a mystery, just as it is for St Paul who writes in today's second reading of a mystery now revealed to the apostles through the Holy Spirit. Today's Gospel story is one of the most mysterious of all, and it draws us even deeper into the mystery of Christmas. The word mystery, which St Paul uses, comes from a Greek word that means to close the lips: a mystery is something of which one cannot speak. There is nothing to be said; it cannot be explained without cheapening or debasing it; it cannot be commented on without missing more of the truth than we grasp. A mystery cannot be explained, nor can it be understood; it can only be shown, and experienced. As long as we try to reduce God to something that can be explained in words or grasped by the human intellect, we reduce him to something less than ourselves. In many ways the great message of Christmas is to break through

our obsession with explaining and understanding, and to present us with a deep truth and say 'still your mind and just experience this'. And that is just what the wise men do. They come to Bethlehem, and while they had had a long discussion with Herod and his priests and scribes, when they reach Bethlehem they say, as far as we know, not a word. They come in, kneel and do homage, offer gifts and then leave. What a long journey to say nothing! But there is nothing to be said. There is a mystery to be experienced, and that is all that matters. What can be said when confronted with a truth beyond words?

What of those extraordinary gifts? Did they bring them specially for the occasion, all the way from home, or did they decide what to give on the spur of the moment, on the basis of what they saw? Did they just go scrabbling in their saddlebags to choose what seemed best? We don't know the answer. But we do know that these gifts express a clear truth about both the giver and the one who receives. That is what gifts are meant to do. They are something of a mystery themselves, and they have the power to express a deep truth, but also the power to change both the giver and the one who receives. The magi leave knowing that they have experienced something very deep, beyond words, and they have reacted to that which is beyond words with a gesture heavy with meaning. For Mary and Joseph these mysterious gifts give them an insight into who this child is, and what his life will be like. The giving and receiving of gifts (which is, perhaps, not exactly the same as the giving and receiving of presents) has the power to change us.

The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda told a story from his childhood. He was playing in the garden when he noticed a hole in the fence. He sensed that something was about to happen, and then a boy's hand came through the hole and left a white toy sheep, before disappearing. The toy was old, and had been loved, but the giver had disappeared. Neruda ran into the house and brought out a treasure of his own, a pine cone full of scent and resin which he loved, and he set it down where the sheep had been, and left. He never saw the hand or the boy again, but the mysterious exchange of gifts sank deep into his soul and convinced him of the power of brotherhood and togetherness, a connection to those we do not even know. He claimed that this experience remained deep inside him and gave light to his poetry. (Story told in 'The Gift' by Lewis Hyde, Canongate 2006)

The power of mystery, the power of the gift. This little story of the travels of the magi awakens in us some very beautiful response, and so the Christmas feast gives us yet another gift with the power to change us.