

Sermon for 6.1.19 **The Feast of Epiphany** Isaiah 60.1-6; Ps.72.1-7; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12.

Today is the feast of Epiphany: the manifestation or appearance of Jesus Christ to the gentiles through the Magi. The word “epiphany” means a moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation – and I’ve had my own epiphany of late with the realization of how much the feeling of joy is a foundational part, and a major purpose of the Christian faith.

As Jesus explained to the disciples in John’s gospel, after he had given them a plan to live by, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” And in today’s gospel passage we hear how the Magi experienced this joy when they found the Christ.

Now the only biblical reference to the Magi is in the first twelve verses of the second chapter of St Matthew which we read today. There, the writer links the good news of Jesus with Old Testament prophecy, and states that King Herod the Great directed the magi to Bethlehem, the place predicted by Micah as the location of the Messiah’s birth.

Their number, three, is suggested by their three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and it is thought that they were kings by both prophecy in the Book of Psalms “may the kings of Tarshish and of the Isles render him in tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts” and the prophecy of Isaiah, “nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn ... they shall bring gold and frankincense”.

Karl Rayner, a renowned theologian of the 20th Century suggests that when we read the story of the magi, we are really reading our own history, the history of our own pilgrimage.

He writes: “Led by the star, three magi from far off Persia, struggled through deserts and successfully asked their way through indifference and politics until they found the child and could worship him as the saviour-king. It is our history that we read there...”

Do we not all have to admit that we are pilgrims on a journey? ... How time flies, how the days dwindle down, how we are eternally in change. And the journey’s path moves through childhood, through youthful strength and through the maturity of age.

It moves through heights, through misery, through purity and through sin... On and on it goes, irresistibly on from the morning of life to the evening of death.

But where does the journey lead? Do we actually look to find a goal on this journey, because our secret heart knows that there is such a goal, however difficult and long the road might be?

We know very well that God is the goal of our pilgrimage. Sometimes the way to him seems to us all too far and all too hard. But God has promised in his Word that he lets himself be found by those who seek him.

In grace, he wills himself to be found, heart to heart, by that small creature with the eternal heart whom we call the human being.

Behold, the wise men have set out. For their heart was on pilgrimage toward God as soon as their feet pointed toward Bethlehem.

They sought him, but he was already leading them because they sought him.

They were looking for him, for salvation, in the heavens and in their heart. They sought him in seclusion and among people, even in the holy writings of the Jews.

They see a strange star rise in the heavens, and God in his blessed kindness even allows their astrology to succeed this once, because their pure hearts did not know any better.

And so they journeyed. They travel over tortuous paths, but in God's eyes, their path led straight to him because they sought him in sincerity.

The way was long and their feet were often tired, but their hearts carry on to the end. They do not even know where the courage and strength keep coming from. From the scribes in Jerusalem, they got sullen information; and a cunning commission from a king.

And when they came, they knelt down. They brought before the face of the invisible God now made visible, the gold of their love, the incense of their reverence, and the myrrh of their suffering.

And that is why we want to call them by that joyous name of days gone by: the Holy Kings from the East. ¹

So then, let us also step forth on the adventurous journey of the heart to the God who wants to be found! Let us forget what lies behind us.

The whole future lies open to us. Let us throw down our defences. For we are to journey on and discover that the overwhelming joy that the Magi felt when the star stopped at Bethlehem is in the felt presence of God with us every minute of the day and that in that presence all limitations have been overcome and the humdrum activities of the day have become sacred.

The Lord be with you.

¹ Karl Rahner. "The Pilgrimage of Life" in *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings* (Crossroad, New York: 2000). P's 131-134.