

THE EPIPHANY: The baby Jesus is revealed to all; no-one is excluded.
1st Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6: God's glory - & all people - come to Jerusalem;
2nd Reading: Ephesians 3:2-3+5-6: Even 'pagans' now share God's grace;
Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12: The visit of the Magi; their symbolic gifts.

As a boy at St Cuthbert's Grammar School in Newcastle, I was fairly hopeless at sport. PE lessons were made all the worse by each class (about 35 people) doing games as a separate group. The teacher chose two captains; they picked 10 other lads for each side; those not picked (usually including me) were called "the scraps" and were left to mooch around on the fields for the double games lesson. I mention this unsubtle system of 60+ years ago, because it was also how many Jews saw their Gentile neighbours – a sort of religious "scraps", who were never seen as being valuable to God.

In the Epiphany story, the visit of the 'Magi' (or 'wise men') changed that; or rather, it showed that the early Church saw faith as being for all people – not just for one religious or ethnic group. (The Greek word 'Epi-phan'y' means a showing, and the second half of it leads to our English word 'phantom', meaning an apparition, or ghostly showing.) The story of the Magi is so well known that I shall not repeat it here; just to say that the gospel text mentions several wise men, who between them brought three gifts. Despite the traditional hymn "We three kings of Orient are", they were NOT kings, but astronomers or astrologers – people who would have been considered dangerous by ancient Jews, and heretics by the mediaeval Church!

I suspect (from the way Matthew tells the story) that the main stress is on the symbolism of each detail. The Magi were non-Jews searching for wisdom and enlightenment. The 'star' was a miraculous guide (so it seems pointless to try to identify it as a particular comet, supernova, etc). The gifts represented what early Christians believed about Jesus: gold stood for his messianic kingship; frankincense for priesthood - he sacrificed himself; myrrh (an expensive embalming fluid) for his death on the cross – a strange present for a baby. The key to understanding the whole thing is in the 2nd reading, where Paul writes to the Ephesians: "*The 'pagans' (non-Jews) now share the same inheritance; they are parts of the same body; and the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the gospel.*" In other words (to refer back to my schooldays) no Christian believers need to feel they are stuck in "the scraps"!

But how can we make this relevant to us in this first month of 2024? I suggest that we think about how the Magi found their way to Jesus: the 'star' that they followed was a supernatural 'light' that helped them see their way. The question for you and me is this: what 'lights' help us to find our way to Jesus? On the other hand, what 'lights' act as distractions, to take us away from him?

First, the lights that help us to reach Jesus: the most obvious of these is the family into which we are born, and in which we grow up. At their children's baptism, parents promise to bring the child up "in the practice of the faith". I know that this can mean many things to different people, but in the past, it meant a sacramental relationship with the local parish – in other words, taking the child to church. The pandemic that started in 2020 compounded a trend that had begun long before: seeing Sunday church as merely one of several options for weekend activity. I do urge parents to think seriously about this issue: the Church as we have known it is under serious threat of disappearing in many areas. Linked with parish life are (where they are available) religious schools. These usually (but not always) do a valuable job in handing on the faith to the next generation.

But also valuable, as we grow older, is personal contact with people of faith. As a priest, I have always been aware of the importance of 'setting the right tone' in dealing with people. I do not mean a sort of 'image' that TV celebrities nurture for themselves, but whether or not people see in us a person who can represent Jesus Christ. This matters enormously at important moments in life – for example after a loved one's death. We can all make mistakes, and get things wrong, but church workers usually acquire a reputation for sensitivity (or the lack of it) when dealing with lots of people over several years. Good personal contact like this is definitely a 'light' that helps people to find their way to Christ. Often, a chance word, or a point made in sermon, can be one of these 'lights' that work!

But there are also 'lights' that take us away from Jesus. The most obvious are the well-known horrors that we see on TV: war, persecution and chaotic countries, which push millions into trying to flee abroad. Closer to home, I feel for teenagers' parents: our society undermines religion as a valid activity for their growing children. It is hard to see a solution without sounding like a nutcase or religious fundamentalist. I suggest that most believe that the porn & gambling industries are having a terrible effect on young adults. Politicians with liberal or 'woke' views on the one hand, and those with ultra-free-market views on the other, seem unwilling or unable to tackle the problem. It is a tragedy that the child-abuse scandal of recent decades has reduced the moral authority of the RC Church to speak out on these issues. I am sure that most readers could name many other things that lead people away from Jesus. The problem is that these lights seem more attractive and 'fun-filled' than those that lead people towards Christ.

But to end on a more hopeful note: if you watch an international Mass (on TV, or via live-stream), you notice the multi-coloured faces in the congregation, and hear the readings & prayers in various languages. Despite its many faults, our Church flourishes in many parts of the world – especially the far east, where people are just as educated and well-off as here. The message of the Magi has worked! Happy New Year to everyone.

Fr Jim Dunne.