

Sermon Feast of the Epiphany Year C 2019

I am sure you would all be aware of a particular feature of the religious landscape we inhabit: of spirituality being preferred over religion. We would all be aware of some of the arguments that see religion as unnecessary and divisive. And that we can dispense with particular religions because what underlies them all is a basic set of universal moral convictions and intuitions. So, (it is argued) when we grasp and follow these basic moral convictions and intuitions we are spiritually awakened. And we don't have to fall into the arrogance of a particular religion which claim to be absolute. We will be spiritual rather than religious and that will be better not just for us but for everyone. Better for us all to follow the fundamental intuitions behind all the religions rather than cling to any particular religion.

And so many people of faith prefer to be identified as 'seekers' rather than 'believers.' We are encouraged to be independent spiritual operators, working out our own path, our own truth, rather than be a member of a church. We're to aim at being spiritual rather than religious. And so we'll hear things like, my work, my vocation, nature, football is my religion. It's my religion because I find God and meaning there. It's a familiar position. We've all heard it.

There is much to be said for this position. God does indeed dwell in all things. God can indeed be found by those who search. Yes, God can be uncovered in everyday life, in nature, through the sciences. For sure. God can be found in these things. And for sure there are great and universal truths that can be discovered in the classic religious traditions whether it's Buddhism or Hinduism or Sufism. We will find common elements and features. And in the lives and teachings of many of the saints and mystics of these traditions we will see a lot in common.

But. But in none of these spiritualities do we find one which is addressed by the personal and living God. In all these other approaches *we're* doing the searching. For the seeker in these spiritualities God is discovered at the end of a long journey.

It's a very desirable and attractive proposal for us: to make God into a distant force, discovered by our efforts and on our terms. But by having God remain in the background or far off he doesn't make a personal appeal or demand. The God of spirituality is found by us but on our terms and conditions. Now this doesn't mean our perceptions are necessarily wrong. But it does mean they will never reach into God's mind or reach God's distinct purpose.

The peculiar biblical conviction, however, is that God *is not* a distant force. For Christians, God is Person who speaks and acts in history. God is someone who *reveals* to us his mind and purpose. We are not left guessing what it's all about. God shows us, reveals himself to us. Yes, we're spiritual seekers. But above all *God* is a seeker. God is someone who seeks *us* out, who speaks a word of truth to us. This God of revelation focuses and orders all the vague spiritual longings of humankind giving it direction. That is why while we see spirituality as good, as it is, it is never enough. This is why spirituality - our searching and seeking - must give way to something higher, deeper, truer.

Against this background we turn to the story of the journey of the Magi as we celebrate this feast of the Epiphany. Now, who these mysterious men were is not entirely clear. Most likely the magi were men disciplined in the arts of astrology and astronomy. They measured and observed the planets and stars and in this they sought to read the will of God. So, on their terms and using their skill they sought to discern the will of God. We can admire their tenacity, their intelligence, their dedication, and we can see in them a symbol of the best of the spiritual traditions of humankind. They come seeking God.

But here is the hinge, the critical turning point. They do not know precisely where to go or whom they are seeking *until* they meet the representatives of Jewish religion, who then tell them *on the basis of scriptural revelation* where the Messiah is to be born. They follow the star, they follow their measurements and calculations, they follow their intuition and so on. But finally, when they come to Judea and speak to the experts in Biblical truth *then* they understand where they are to go and whom they are seeking - 'the Messiah in Bethlehem of Judea.'

Now, it goes against so much of what we are taught, and so much of the mindset and mood of our culture - this idea that there was a particular people chosen by God to receive the particular revelation of God. We are told everyone is equal, everyone has equal access to the truth and can work out their own truth. Claims to particularity and uniqueness (we are told) are dangerous and divisive. But, we must get over this if we are going to take the scriptures seriously and on their own terms. Importantly though, Israel is not chosen for itself. It is chosen for the nations, for all the seekers of the world. This is the paradox of Israel's particularity in the divine plan: There is something unique, distinct about Israel. But Israel is chosen so that all who seek God might find God. This is so important as we remember the other name for this feast as the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles; the showing of Christ to the nations. This is what the coming of the wise men signifies: the light of truth coming to all nations. Christ comes to complete Israel's vocation to bring God's light and truth to all peoples.

We serve no purpose and do no justice if we say Israel is just one nation among many nations and its faith one spiritual path along with all others. No! In Israel is found something *unique and particular*. It is a people to whom God speaks - reveals - God's own mind and heart. God gives Israel the Law and the Covenant, the Patriarchs, the Temple and its worship, the long and noble prophetic tradition. And by these shaped a people according to God's mind and heart. And the culminating moment of God revealing, of God speaking, is when he gave his Son for the salvation of the world.

Once the wise men know where to go, they go! And they find what they had all along, yet unknowingly, been seeking. They found what they were looking for, but they *couldn't have* without the particularity of Israel's revelation. So it is with all seekers today. All our spiritual endeavours will be frustrated unless and until it draws us to the God of Jesus Christ, the light for all nations. We all need to remember it is God who seeks us out. It is not our seeking that matters so much as the fact that we are sought by God, a God who seeks, speaks to us, who desires to be known by us. All our spiritual seeking must give way, must surrender. And we must allow ourselves to be found. Amen.