

Sermon Feast of the Epiphany 2021

A very happy new year to you all. On this great feast of the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, let us all hope and indeed pray that, following the darkness of the past year, the year ahead will be filled with light. The metaphors of light and darkness, of course, are pervasive throughout Holy Scripture and the traditions of the church. But such imagery reaches its highest point now, on the Feast of the Epiphany. For those of us in the southern hemisphere, this is the day - in the full, bright light of January - when we often speak of Christ as brightness, as radiance, as the child bathed in starlight - attempting to articulate how our Incarnate God is not simply present among us, but *revealed to us*. Just as a day is revealed by the dawning of the sun, so God's saving action among us is revealed in the dawning on Christ the Son.

In the opening verse of the Old Testament reading today, Isaiah declares, *Arise, shine; for your light has come*. It is an invitation to wake from sleep, and for all the world to gather before God, to pay homage to God. Jerusalem here stands a sign of the presence of God, *bright* and *glorious*. Isaiah says that the nations shall come to this light and the kings to the brightness of this dawn. In the gospel set for this day we hear, then, of the nations streaming to this light. *Though night still covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples*, we encounter the story of the travellers from the East on their long journey through the dark. But a darkness we have been promised will vanish in the dawn of this new light that is the Glory of the Lord.

We observed his star at its rising, the wise men say. This star which has become such a ubiquitous symbol of this season is the very sign of that Light which will attract the nations, which will draw all people to One True Light. And this star is a reminder that the birth of Jesus is not just of some holy man, not just the arrival of some ruler or king as we might normally understand such a figure, not just someone who will be a wise sage and great teacher. No, the presence of that leading star is a signal - to them, to us! - that the birth of this child has *cosmic* consequence. This child is the pivot on which the whole universe spins.

Now, exactly who these strange visitors were is difficult to discern. Were they wise men? Kings? Persian magicians? The text says "Magi," and our tradition of song and story has overlaid a multitude of meanings - for example, that there were three of them, and what their names were. But in the text, there are not three men, but *three gifts*. There *could* have been three magi - or 30!

What is clear is that they are otherworldly, mysterious. These travellers are not part of the Jewish world. They come from far away. They stand for the world, the nations, the gentiles, flocking to the light of God. As they get close, they seek council from Herod. We, perhaps, want to shout “No! Don’t ask him!” Herod is afraid of the child, and we all know there is nothing more dangerous than a powerful man when he is afraid. So, even as Isaiah calls us to the light, even as we see the magi following the light of the star, we encounter, by way of contrast, this figure of darkness; an icon, if you like, of darkness. But in the profound truth we know from John’s Gospel, *the light shines in the dark, and the darkness could not overpower it*. Despite Herod’s sinister plan, despite his evil heart and dark intent, the light prevails. It leads the magi to their hearts desire.

From the text, we know that when they find the child with his mother their home, they pay him homage. The word that gets translated as “homage” is a wonderful combination of the Greek words for “to fall down” (prostrate) and “to kiss.” This is worship at its most pure. They find this child, which is the goal of their journey, and they fall down in praise. And then, of course, they offer the gifts. The gold because the baby is a king, the one who has *been born the King of the Jews*. They offer the child frankincense because he is God, and the incense symbolizes prayer rising to the heavens. And they offer him myrrh, which was often used for burials and symbolized death, because even here at the beginning of this story about Jesus, we remember that this story goes to the cross and beyond.

We are all on our own journeys through the dark, carrying our own gifts within us. We, too, seek to find truth in this world of darkness. We, too, bear our gifts and are seeking the right place to lay them down. We come bearing gold, our gift for our king. To whom and to what do we owe our allegiance? Who is our king? What orients our lives in the political spectrum? There are any number of authorities who would eagerly have our obedience and fealty. How do we know which loud voice in the clamour of the world should be obeyed?

We come bearing frankincense and seeking what is holy in this world. We are all looking for something to give our lives over to, a complete, Transcendent Truth which will give our lives meaning and substance, something beyond the transience and impermanence of life. We all seek something that will make us fall on our knees in honour of something greater than yourself?

We come bearing myrrh, in all that we mourn. We are all bearing grief in this world. Last year brought its fair share to us all. And we are looking for a place to lay it down. Myrrh was used for the anointing of a dead body. What are we ready to bury? What do you need to let go of and mourn the loss of? Whom do we obey? What do we worship? Where can we lay our broken hearts? The answer is, Jesus, the One who is the Light that illuminates even the deep darkness of our hearts and lives.

At the end of mass today, we will move promptly to outside of the church. There, in line with ancient and widespread custom for this day, we will bless chalk. And with that chalk mark the door of this church with the date of this year and with the letters C M B. They are the initials for the names traditionally designated to the wise men: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But these letters also represent *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, Latin for “Christ Bless this House.” Some chalk and little prayer cards have been prepared for *you* to take home, so that you might repeat the action in your homes, that you ask God to bless your home, its residents and all who visit over the coming year.

It is an important catholic principle - indeed an essential Incarnational principle - that the simple things of earth – in this case the very earth, mere chalk – not only communicates God’s saving work, but are actually channels of God’s saving grace. So, don’t just throw that prayer sheet away when you receive it! Don’t just toss the chalk away and think, Fr René is expecting too much of us now by asking to take our religion home with us!

Because, yes, we invite Christ, light of the world into our lives, into our hearts. But that means we also invite him into our homes. And we want him to bless our homes, to be present to our homes! Your homes are the place – the very arena – in which God will do his best work in you! So do not exclude him from your homes. Allow his light to come to your dwelling place. That is why we celebrate this custom today: because we want Christ, light of the world, light of all peoples, light of the nations, to be the light of our lives, the light our hearts, the light of our homes. And because it is surely *in our homes that what we obey, what we worship, and what we mourn truly show themselves*, truly manifest themselves. We will never progress in the spiritual life, we will never advance in the life of Christ, if we seek to cordon off certain areas, if we say religion is for church, but keep home away from it. Today, we take simple chalk, we bless it, mark our doors and say, Christ, enter even here. Amen.