

Sermon Feast of the Epiphany 2023

At the start of the year, I was reminded how good things are for most of us. I saw a list of 10 signs that you are doing well in life: you have a roof over your head; you ate today; you have a good heart; you wish good for others; you have clean water; someone cares for you; you strive to be better; you have clean clothes; you have a dream; you are breathing. A simple list like that reminds us that our lives are not as bad as we sometimes like to imagine, even if the majority of the world's population would not be able to put their hand up to half of that list. So, at the start of the year, it is good to *appreciate* what we do have, what we have been blessed with, what is good in our lives.

And we might extend that to appreciation of what we have in the church, even in this church. Anglicans can be pretty expert at denigrating and disparaging their own church. And others, still, who do not appreciate what we have but rather delight in gossip and complaint. So, at the start of this year perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves of some of the good things we can rightly appreciate. That here the worship of God is conducted with reverence and devotion week in and week out; that there is a team of servers and singers and musicians to assist our worship; that there are priests who care for you and pray for you; that we attempt to maintain and improve what we have been entrusted with; that there are programs to enhance and develop our faith; that this is a beautiful place which can touch the heart and soul. Familiarity can breed contempt and maybe we do not appreciate enough what God has blessed us with.

Those of you who have been here a while perhaps do not notice very much now the beautiful fabric and fittings about us, including the fine set of stained-glass windows. It is well recorded that within this church are three distinct styles: the set of Australian glass in the five sanctuary windows; the brightly coloured Munich-style windows in the transepts, and in a number of the windows in the nave. And traditional English style for the rest, including Faith, Hope, and Charity and Peter and Paul in the chapel; the Annunciation; the childhood of Christ; and in the Baptistry the Adoration of the Magi. As so often, the Magi window here tells the whole story. The two main panels depict the three wise men before Mary and the Christ child. One of the smaller panels beneath shows their journey following the star. The other panel depicts their dream warning them to avoid Herod and not to return to Jerusalem. At some point, pause at the baptistry and appreciate this fine depiction of the mystery we celebrate today. Because it is only from within do we see and appreciate its beauty.

This past week I have been personally saddened at the death of Pope Benedict XVI, someone instrumental in my own faith and theology (and I offer a more extended reflection on this in the pew bulletin this week). As we consider things to be appreciative of, he is certainly one of them. In a homily delivered during Benedict's visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City in 2008 he used the image of the church's magnificent stained-glass windows to invite people inside the church:

"I would like to draw your attention to a few aspects of this beautiful structure which I think can serve as a starting point for a reflection on our particular vocations within the unity of the Mystical Body.

"The first has to do with the stained glass windows, which flood the interior with mystic light. From the outside, those windows are dark, heavy, even dreary. But once one enters the church, they suddenly come alive; reflecting the light passing through them, they reveal all their splendor. Many writers ... have used the image of stained glass to illustrate the mystery of the Church herself. It is only from the inside, from the experience of faith and ecclesial life, that we see the Church as she truly is: flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit. It follows that we, who live the life of grace within the Church's communion, are called to draw all people into this mystery of light.

"This is no easy task in a world which can tend to look at the Church, like those stained glass windows, 'from the outside': a world which deeply senses a need for spirituality, yet finds it difficult to 'enter into' the mystery of the Church. Even for those of us within, the light of faith can be dimmed by routine, and the splendor of the Church obscured by the sins and weaknesses of her members. It can be dimmed too, by the obstacles encountered in a society which sometimes seems to have forgotten God and to resent even the most elementary demands of Christian morality.

You, who have devoted your lives to bearing witness to the love of Christ and the building up of his Body, know from your daily contact with the world around us how tempting it is at times to give way to frustration, disappointment and even pessimism about the future. In a word, it is not always easy to see the light of the Spirit all about us, the splendor of the Risen Lord illuminating our lives and instilling renewed hope in his victory over the world (cf. Jn 16:33).

Yet the word of God reminds us that, in faith, we see the heavens opened, and the grace of the Holy Spirit lighting up the Church and bringing sure hope to our world."

I take time with all of that precisely because of the mystery we celebrate today: the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles; Christ light of the gentiles; Christ light of the world! The truth that the light of Christ is most perfectly experienced within the church is what is expressed in the familiar story we hear today. It was not enough for those mysterious magi simply to acknowledge a king had been born in some distant land. It was not enough even to travel to Jerusalem to relay their news to Herod. No. They had to follow where they were led. And however mysterious – indeed miraculous – the way which led them, they were brought to *the house* of Mary and the child Jesus. They were brought to the house. It is in the house they encounter Jesus, offer their precious gifts, and pay him worship.

According to long-standing practice, we understand the building of the church to be both the House of God, and the home of the church. The church is our home. It is the place we encounter Christ. It is the place where true worship is offered. The magi, then, bear witness to the essential mission of the church: to worship the God revealed in Jesus Christ. And this can only occur within the church. Not the four walls of a particular building. But the church, in Benedict's words, *flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit*. No wonder then, the magi must leave home, endure a difficult journey, and follow a strange sign. Because their mission and vocation could not be fulfilled other than going to the house. And nor will ours. Many Christians now, however, and certainly in this country, live as effective pagans. Their priorities, passions, worldview, and morality no different and no better than the mass of unsaved about us. Many Christians think it is completely acceptable - even desirable - to bring pagan darkness into the life of the church.

Saint Irenaeus in the second century noted that point of the magi's visit was the *humiliation* of paganism; the giving of their gifts was an act of submission and capitulation to a greater power. At the end of mass today, we gather around the church door and ask Christ to bless this house. This house because it is our home and because within it we encounter Christ, within is *flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit*. At the start of a new year let us recognize – indeed, appreciate! – the brilliance of the light that shines through. And leave the darkness where it belongs. Amen.