

The Epiphany of the Lord 2009

The figures in our crib have changed. The shepherds have returned to their sheep and their place has been taken by far more mysterious people. Traditionally they are dressed as kings, but we know that in reality these men were magi, or wise men, probably astronomers and experts in the natural sciences, the way the world works. In that great explosion of divine energy that surrounds the birth of Christ, and which persists in the bright light of the star, these men have been disturbed and shaken out of their ordinary lives, and have decided to do something extraordinary: they have travelled West, in search of the new king. So the men who we portray as kings but are not, come to see the child dressed in swaddling clothes who is really a king. But if our crib figures have rather confused us about the real nature of these men, there is another way in which the figures in our crib get to the heart of this story. Traditionally there are three men, but really the number matters little; traditionally one of them is dark skinned, and another of them is older, but again these signify little. What really matters is that in our cribs by tradition at least one of the magi is on his knees - in fact in the crib in The Presbytery he is virtually lying on his face, stretching out to offer his gift to the child. Now this really is important, because here the magi remind us that they are not curious visitors, coming to see something that has stirred their intellectual interest. We sometimes get a little confused about which aspects of the Epiphany story appear in the scriptures and which are legendary additions, so let me remind you what St. Matthew says: "They saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage".

Whatever it is that they thought they were doing, whatever they expected to find, the moment they see the child they realise that in fact they have found God. Worship is the only response that makes any sort of sense. It is true that the magi represent the Gentile world, people from outside the Jewish religion, coming to the infant Christ; it is also true that they are representatives of science and knowledge, acknowledging that their wisdom is dependent on God and his creation, not superior to it. But in God's great plan for the events that surround the birth of his Son, the most significant thing that the magi do is to fall on their knees. They are there in the Christmas story to make absolutely sure that we do not forget how special this child is. The proper

response to the sight of the Holy Family is not the sentimental 'isn't it sweet', or the understandable human fascination with every newborn child, so weak and helpless but so full of hope and promise; it is awe and amazement that drives us to our knees. The kneeling magi make sure we cannot forget that right at the heart of the Christmas tableau is God himself.

This makes the magi indispensable to a proper celebration of the Christmas mystery. They may arrive later than the shepherds, but they cannot be ignored. They are guardians who stand watch over the celebration of this feast to make sure that we do not forget that this is a story about the union of God and man, a union which no power can reverse. This is vitally important, because it is always tempting, sometimes from the best of motives, to promote a sort of Godless Christianity. People of good will sometimes feel that belief in God is too difficult for modern man, too far from his ordinary experience, something that he doesn't have the language or the skill to get his mind around. So they stop talking about God, and salvation, and eternal life, and instead they look for something more accessible. There is sometimes a sort of perception that aspects of our faith are too difficult, even too embarrassing, so we will look for safer ground, we will talk about things which are more likely to receive a sympathetic hearing from the sceptics, the atheists and the indifferent. In these circumstances there is a temptation to stop talking about the salvation of souls, say, and start talking about saving the planet; people are no longer challenged to a radical conversion, a radical change of life focussed on following Christ, but instead they are presented with lifestyle choices about everyday living which may indeed make the world better, even make people happier as they live better lives, but which are ultimately hollow because they leave the heart of our being, our deepest nature, that part of us which is created for union with God, untouched. This, in fact, was one of the points made by the Pope in his much misrepresented speech just before Christmas, when he said:

"Yes, the tropical forests merit our protection, but the human being as a creature merits no less protection – a creature in which a message is written which does not imply a contradiction of our liberty, but the condition for it".

That is to say, there is no point in trying to be green unless we also ask ourselves the question 'What is a human being? What are we created to be?'. In fact, unless we start with those questions, unless we really try to understand what a human being is and what human life is really all about, we have no chance of treating our world as it needs to be treated. As long as people feel they are at liberty to do as they please, the natural world is doomed; only when human beings accept that they are limited by their creation - that certain actions have certain consequences, can any true approach to green issues start.

I have wandered a little from my theme, but I have not completely lost touch with the magi. They are there, kneeling, to remind me that Christmas is about mysterious realities beyond my control; they are there to challenge me that I must resist the temptation of preaching a gospel that is acceptable and accessible to people only because it leaves them fundamentally unchallenged, a gospel in which God has become invisible. Christianity which is no more than being fair, thoughtful and considerate with a social conscience is deeply unappealing because it does all of these things rather less well than other agencies; one would not cross the road to see such a thing, let alone make a long and dangerous journey from the east. Those concerns only take on life and meaning when they are presented as a part of a vision of human life that has at its centre the beautiful, mysterious and magnetic person of Christ, who alone has the power to satisfy our deepest longings and to answer our toughest questions.