

Homily for The Solemnity of The Epiphany 2010

Every year our celebration of Christmas is disturbed by the arrival of some strange, mysterious, uninvited guests. Days ago the secular world shifted from celebrating Christmas to hunting for bargains, and even Christians are beginning to think about the return to ordinary time and ordinary life. Just at the moment when the great feast seems to be losing momentum, the magi arrive, rather like guests who turn up just as the party is winding down. Furthermore, they don't quite seem to fit in, they seem to have strayed here from some other story. They are some sort of wise men, astronomers or magicians or something similar, who have come from the east, probably from Persia. Their clothes, their language, their beliefs, everything about them is peculiar and unfamiliar. They go straight to Jerusalem, the royal city, to look for the newborn king, which must have seemed to them a reasonable enough place to look, but it causes uproar.

Herod is an old man, approaching the end of his life. He has clung to power by a mixture of brutality, executing several members of his own family including one of his wives and several of his sons, and cleverly balancing opposing powers. His reign is based on carefully maintaining the support of the Romans, who distrust him but tolerate him as long as he keeps the territory under control, and the Jews, many of whom regard him as barely Jewish at all because his family were recent converts, who he tries to please, amongst other things by, rebuilding the Temple. Herod's grip on power was dependent on a complex balancing act and the threat of brutality. No wonder the arrival of magi looking for another king sent him and the whole city into turmoil. One of the roles that the magi have in the Christmas story is to disturb, and they play this role to perfection. When they arrive in the city they start to ask in public where to find the new born king. When Herod hears about this he calls his own wise men to find out where the Messiah is to be born, and then he summons the magi privately. No-one else is to know about their conversation. It is to be their secret. But it seems the wise men have already seen through Herod. When they first arrived, they are full of questions in the public forum, but in private with Herod they do not say a word: 'having listened to what the king had to say they set out'. They listened to him,

but they did not speak, they did not reply. This is a moment when wisdom demands silence.

In fact, from the moment that the magi ask where to find the newborn king, they do not speak again. They travel to Bethlehem, they go into the house, fall on their knees, worship the Lord and present their gifts, and then they leave. When the shepherds came to see Jesus they told Mary all about what had happened, and how they came to be there, but the wise men do not. In the presence of Jesus, the Word of God, they fall silent and do not say a word. This is almost the most disturbing aspect of the whole story. We live in a culture that is very uncomfortable with silence, and where words flood all around us. Words can indeed inform, inspire, communicate, but sometimes they can also get in the way. It is the quality, not the quantity of words that really matters, and this idea has become lost in a world of blogs, and twitter, and facebook, which allows anyone with access to a computer to flood the internet with more and more words. We have fallen victim to the old problem which is all too familiar to anyone who listens to homilies: people just don't know when to stop talking.

Sometimes words just get in the way. They can become something that hides what is going on rather than revealing it. I was at the ballet last week (you know I like to be a bit different, here's a homily with ballet!) and I was struck by just how much of a story can be told without a single word being spoken. A huge theatre full of people knew exactly what was happening simply by virtue of music and movement. Words would have added nothing at all - in fact they would have obscured what was taking place. This is exactly the approach of the magi. They have nothing to say: what would you say when you come to the end of your long journey and find the incarnate Son of God? There simply IS nothing to say. We might be tempted to mumble some platitude, something that we know sounds silly even as we are saying it, but they are wise enough to avoid that. Coming into the presence of God, they just fall on their Knees, and that says it all. Then from out of their luggage they bring gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts are not given to Mary, but to Jesus. What use has a baby for myrrh, or for frankincense, or even for gold? These are useless gifts, but their real value lies in the fact that they mean something, they say something, they speak without the need for words. In marked contrast to so many gifts, these ones are

exploding with meaning. I wonder what happened to them. Did Mary keep them? Did she show them one day to Jesus as she told him the story of the magi's visit? One thing is for sure, for the rest of her life Mary would remember this day, would remember these gifts, would wonder what they could mean, would chew over in her mind the fact that, as soon as her son was born even wise men from far off gentile lands could see her son was a king, was God, and was destined for suffering.

This year the thing that strikes me most forcefully about the magi is their silence. They say not a word to Herod, because they can see their words would only be used against them, used to destroy, to distort, to kill. So they leave him in silence, and return home without even seeing him again. When they come to Bethlehem, although their hearts are full of delight at the sight of the star, they say nothing. These wonderful, mysterious men in strange and foreign clothes sweep into the house, throw themselves at Jesus' feet, pour out their lavish gifts, and then are gone. There is absolutely nothing that words could add to their actions, so they do not use them. They go home, and we are left to wonder: have we come to rely too much on words. One of the beauties of Catholic worship is that it depends so much on sight, sound, smell - have we managed to obscure the meaning of what we do by saying so much; are we generally just too lazy with our use of words, always talking, talking, talking instead of looking, listening, acting. For all of their silence, these late arrivals at the crib leave us full of questions, leave us once more a little uneasy with the old way of doing things.