

EPIPHANY HOMILY 2021
A UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF GOOD NEWS FOR ALL
Mt 2.1-12 Is 60.1-6 Eph 3.2-6
The Wise Men (The Rhyme Bible)

Much mythology has developed over the centuries about the wise ones from the East. They morphed into kings in the Western Church as time went by, starting off as shady characters bearing gifts for the child Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, although Luke, the Greek doctor and author, is generally the universalist. Names evolved with Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior, Caspar then becoming black, so he'd fit right in with "***Black Lives Matter***" in the contemporary scene! Whatever, the message is relevant to us now, in that it is a clear depiction of universality and inclusion of all of humanity, and not just those of a particular persuasion or tradition. Isn't it amazing that race, traditions and beliefs can still be such a divisive issue, and cause for hostility and misunderstanding in our contemporary world?

Back then, astrology was synonymous with astronomy, and the one thing about the stars was that they were fixed in the night sky, and nothing could knock them out of existence, apart from falling stars, and black holes (not quite identified at the time!). Comedian Spike Milligan had an image of the stars being pinpricks in the heavenly overlay which let the rain in! ("*There are holes in the sky Where the rain gets in. But they're ever so small. That's why the rain is thin.*") These days, astronomers would generally take offence if you asked their star sign, as if it meant something beyond amusement, which is all it is to me!! And now the new James Webb telescope, far superior to the Hubble, is unfolding in the heavens, as I speak, to increase our understanding of the mysteries of the Universe out there. Fascinating stuff!

Apparently, Jewish tradition frowned upon astrology, but Matthew is happy enough to take the image of a star guiding the foreigners to the mystery of ***Holy Night***, the birth of Jesus among us. It's interesting how the simplicity, humility and isolation of the Nativity scene is interrupted by first the low class, poor shepherds, bringing no presents, apart from their adoring and admiring presence, later to be followed by the wise strangers from the East, who are portrayed as bringing expensive and extravagant gifts, symbolic of who this child Jesus really is and of what his mission in human life is to be.

Epiphany enhances the emphasis on peace and good will to all, with its inclusive theme reflecting human diversity in the mystery of it all.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh represent kingship, sacredness, and suffering, so foretelling the future of what his mission is to be in life, but ending in suffering and death, before the ultimate victory of his ongoing presence among us, guided by his spirit, as people of hope.

In story and art, much has been painted and written about the Magi, as in poet TS Eliot's 1927 ***Journey of the Magi***, or O. Henry's 1905 short Christmas story, ***The Gift of the Magi***, of a loving couple, Della and Jim, who gave up their most important possession to enhance the other, only to find what they had given up or sacrificed, defeated the purpose, she selling her long hair for a platinum chain for his pocket watch, and he selling his watch to buy combs for her beautiful tresses of hair. Ultimately, the lesson learnt was how deeply they loved each other and wanted the best for the other, not their individual selves. Perhaps a lesson could be taken here about getting vaxxed and boosterized (*I'm in for it next Tuesday!*) for the benefit of the broader community, as well as one's individual good.

During a period of depression in his life, it is said that TS Eliot's "*Catholic faith gave him a re-affirmation of life. Here he is not only talking about the sacred journey of seeing the birth of Christ, but a closer, inner journey within all who search for something... death of an old manifestation, birth of a new world... The journey of search within each one of us cannot be understood by others... 'With an alien people clutching their gods'. Death of paganism and birth of the new religion.*" Eliot writes from the perspective of one of the Magi, looking back on the tough, but worthwhile journey, with the ongoing search for truth on the return home. "*A cold coming we had of it. Just the worst time of the year. For a journey and such a long journey, the ways deep and the weather sharp. The very dead of winter... A hard time we had of it... And I would do it again.*"

Then there's the Irishman Dermot Morgan's poem about the fourth wise man bringing some practical gifts: "*A quick inspection of his bag gave Mary's heart a lift. A frozen casserole was there, and a stuffed and fluffy toy. Some baby clothes in pastel blue – he'd guessed it was a boy! 'The thought of washing nappies', Mary cried, need not unnerve us, for here's a 6 month voucher for a nappy-washing service!*" (I think I remember my own Mum, with 5 young children and 2 elderly grandparents, thankful for getting such a voucher one Christmas, or maybe after a birth!) She turned to thanks the stranger, but the stranger wasn't there. He'd slipped away and vanished in the chilly winter air. But on the gate he'd left a note, quite simple but profound – 'Don't write this in the Gospel, please – I'd never live it down!' So don't forget the Fourth Wise Man – the wisest of the lot. He brought the really useful gifts the other three forgot."

If we believe in the mystery of Incarnation, this reflection has a point, in that day to day life is not always glorious and exciting, as regular routine can be boring, but the practical necessities have to be attended to. And I couldn't locate the other story by a wag about a Fourth Wise Man bringing a fruitcake, but getting lost with his camel in a sandstorm!

The journey of the Magi can be taken as symbolic of our own life journeys, through all the ups and downs, the highs and lows, and unpredictable challenges we face at all stages. As, who could have foreseen the last 2 years of lockdown and ongoing COVID issues. Let's be thankful for the gift of scientific research in the rapid developments of vaccines to counter the scourge and return us to relative freedom and normality, but with caution and care for ourselves and each other, hoping for a better and happier 2022.

Epiphany is certainly a feast which has stimulated our imagination, as well as giving us a further insight into the universality of the Christmas message of peace, good will, love and hope for the future.

And so, now it's a Happy, healthy and safe New Year to all, near and far.

Buon anno, Bonne Annee, Stastny Novy rok 2022, Frohes Neues Jahr, Szczesliwego Nowego Roku, sanat jadidat saeeda, Xinnian hao, sretna Nova godina, Haud Hogmanay, athbhliain faoi mhaise duit.

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Sunday 2nd January 2022