

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY | 08.01.2017

It can't be helped but I persist anyway: before festivals like today, I try to text all our young families, telling them what delights are in store as part of the 10am Mass. Being Epiphany we will have the Galette du Roi ceremony with the special cake divided up but only one slice having the tiny King figure which gives that child the special crown for the day.

To my text a typical response from Meredith: "Happy New Year to you too but sorry, we are out of town this week-end..."

Which of course is a rather telling lesson as we think what the Feast of the Epiphany is all about: journeys.

Last week we talked about the traditions that had grown up to give names to the Kings – Melchior, Balthasar and Gaspar: and the idea that they came from the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa; and even that they were descended from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. I told you of the tradition that in Ethiopia, you get not just three but twelve Magi - and all their names too!

In each and every year even a small congregation like ours will be full of stories of journeys taken – over Christmas to Singapore, to Hong Kong, to Auckland, to St Lucia, to the US, and of course to destinations all over the UK. Web booking and e-ticketing has made it all so easy and the air miles, the road miles and the rail miles mount up and up.

But what effect does all this have on us? With travel so relatively easy are we radically touched by the experience or, as one rather jaded traveler said to me recently, *all airport lounges soon come to look the same?*

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... So begins TS Eliot's poem 'Journey of the Magi'. You may know it with its long complaints about sore footed camels, and riders looking for liquor and women. He even moans about the lack of information along the way – the complaint of all travelers for all time I guess!

But towards the end of the poem there is a reflection: *what have we done this journey for?* And he asks a peculiar question: *were we led to see birth or death?* In the context of Christmas, this seems a rather odd thing to ask but he is determined:

*There was birth, certainly. We had evidence and no doubt.
I had seen birth and death, but had thought that they were different;
this birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like death, our death.
We returned to our places, these kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people, clutching their gods...*

It is if the kings, full of high courage and hope, had had the smiles wiped off their faces by the experience of their journey to meet Jesus – to say nothing of the fiendish pogrom that was unleashed by Herod after he had been left out of the key events altogether.

I am afraid I had forgotten just how down-beat this poem of 1927 was and so want to move on quickly. But not before we capture at least the depth of the change that had occurred to those magnificent travelling men. Because the best of journeys should leave us with something that challenges us – even re-directs us. With my dreadful memory, I have to take photographs to remind me, but each of those images is about the facing of a new reality, a new context, a new perspective... It will stop us just putting one foot in front of another as if that is all there is. And good experiences will often have the effect of taking us back to our roots so that our lives become like a series of twists of an Archimedes screw, each revolution being not quite like the last one.

Justin Welby in his New Year message, was inevitably reflecting on 2016, on Brexit and on events on the other side of the pond too. And he flagged up, again not surprisingly, the divisive nature of the referendum – a journey which many commentators tell us opened wide the fissures in the that is our society, a crack that has been waiting to be released for at least a generation.

But Justin is not TS Eliot and his vision is certainly more positive: *I know, he writes, that if we look at our roots, our culture and our history in the Christian tradition we will find a path towards reconciling the differences that have divided us.*

And his remedy? *The country will only flourish if we welcome those in need, give generously and take hold of the future with determination and courage. Living well together despite our differences, offering hospitality to the stranger and those in exile, with unshakable hope for the future – these are the gifts, the commands and the promises of Jesus Christ.*

Such a journey does not, of course, require us to head for the nearest airport but it is no less radical an experience. It requires us to look at where we are, here and at home, and to see with new eyes the state of the community in which we live.

And in that task we are not so unlike TS Eliot's comment: *but we were no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people, clutching their gods...* The Christian journey, on which all of us are engaged, will surely and necessarily make us uneasy with the present state of affairs. And so, instead of thinking of the Church's worship as just a repetition of what we did last week (and the week before for that matter) what we are hoping our worship is about is the gradual unfolding of God's promises, that Archimedes screw turning inexorably into a deliberate commitment to build a new kingdom here on earth. And in particular, Justin reminds us, we build that kingdom by offering hospitality and finding whatever way we can to build bridges of peace and reconciliation.

Last week I took a small risk in that direction and I invited Fr Seamus from St John's to come and not only talk over the ecumenical trip we hope to take to St Paul's on Saturday 21st but to come and say Evening Prayer at the usual Thursday time of 6pm, here in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. I rather expected him to say he hadn't got time: he is immensely busy running two big parishes. But that is what we did. And in a small way we made a step in the direction of reconciliation between our churches. It was another journey – and it happened on our doorstep.

Journeys will often make us feel uneasy – and that is good because that is how we grow. As we remember the Three Kings, whether through TS Eliot's eyes or not, let us commit ourselves to the journey, anticipating ups and downs along the way but also looking forward to the way our eyes and our hearts are opened up to the new things that God is already doing among us.