

Epiphany of the Lord (B)
(Isaiah 60:1-6 / Matthew 2:1-12)
06.01.2015

On this feast of the Epiphany I would like to draw your attention to a word that is used three times in our gospel text we read today. The word is **homage**.

This word is so important in the passage read from Matthew's gospel that we could say that the story hinges on it.

Twice we are told that the magi came to pay the Christ-child *homage*

Once it is said that Herod pretended he also wanted to pay *homage* to the child, but, of course, we know that he didn't really want to do that. Herod was too caught up in himself to give anyone else a look-in.

If the word *homage* is fundamental to today's gospel text, so too is what we see happening at the heart of the story: **the offering of gifts**.

The magi pay homage to the Lord, each one offering their particular gift to Him.

Each of the sages who followed the star to Bethlehem paid homage not only by the material gift he brought, but by giving something of himself.

Just think of all that was involved in the long journey the magi made Bethlehem. They had to sacrifice their time and energy, their very self for this expedition.

They went to great trouble and they dared to take risks.

The same attitude of heart is required of us if we are to live in relationship with the Lord.

Our relationship with the Lord, lived in response to His relationship with us, must find expression in self-gift.

At one stage or another, any really important relationship in our lives will prove itself to be a costly affair, for any true relationship demands that we give something of ourselves in it.

If our relationship with the Lord mirrors His relationship with us - if it is rooted in love, founded upon love, built up through love - then it will involve self-gift.

And, where there is self-gift, there will always be a degree of sacrifice or renunciation.

It is love's nature to give.

A true lover always wants to give him or her self to their loved one.

One who really loves gives without counting the cost. He or she dares to take risks. He or she dares to be knowingly reckless in their love for their loved one.

Before being able to give our lives we must first have received them, of course, for, our life is itself a gift - a gift which comes to us from God.

I wonder if that is always how we see things.

On occasion we underestimate ourselves terribly. We can fail to see and receive ourselves as gift. This is a real problem for many of us.

But, are we not also tempted at other times to think of ourselves as totally self-sufficient beings, autonomous individuals?

When this is so, we can become so caught up in our self that nobody else, not even God, ever really gets a look-in, except to the degree that this other could serve some purpose to us.

There is always a danger for us to see and to use our relationships with others simply to our own advantage. When this is how we operate then we can (albeit unconsciously) so easily slip into being abusive of others' love for us.

It is probably fair to say that Herod functioned in this way. He comes across to us in the gospels as someone who was very self-interested. He was certainly full of self-importance.

That is how he related to Jesus. He asked himself: how could this child eventually be disadvantageous to me? And later on in the story: what could be in a relationship with Jesus for me? Unfortunately, some people only relate to others in this way. They look at everything from the perspective of their own interest.

They become totally ego-centric. The other does not count except to serve their ego.

Or, if the other is a threat to them, then they are anxious to wipe them out.

When a person becomes centred on their self they easily cast others off and even cruelly eliminate them. They might not even realise it (they often don't), but their behaviour becomes despicable.

In contrast to those who give of themselves freely and engage in true loving relationships, those who are self-obsessed cling to themselves. They can cling to themselves so tightly that they actually end up strangulating their own life. They hinder themselves from living in that freedom to which we are called as God's children.

Self-clinging is ultimately self-destructive. It inhibits growth and blocks development.

It makes proper relationships with others impossible to attain and maintain.

We are told that the magi brought gifts to the Lord and we are told what these gifts were.

There have been many interpretations proposed in regard to the significance of these offerings.

Patristic thought has drawn out some dominant lines of interpretation.

The Church Fathers found much to ponder in these offerings. They interpreted them as symbols of what every Christian is called to offer - thus inviting us to enter into a self-offering mode as we live this feast. The Church Fathers agree, by and large, that **gold** can be seen as the gift of love and/or charity expressed in good works, that **incense** can be seen as prayer and faith, a commitment to a life of holiness, and **myrrh** can be regarded as the purification of suffering in one's life - and, beyond suffering and death, belief in the resurrection.

While the magi are often presented as having offered a sampling of the ancient world's costliest gifts, *giving the best*, as it were, I think it worth noting that these products were more readily available in the ancient world than they are in our world today.

While certainly valuable, these gifts were not quite as exotic to those who brought them and the One who received them as might appear to us.

I like to think of them as the products of the magi's homelands.

The men from the East brought these gifts to the Christ-child just as we might bring a piece of Galway crystal, or of Belleek China or an Irish bog wood carving to someone we are visiting in a foreign land, both to say something about where we come from and to honour the person we are visiting.

What I see symbolised for us here is that everyone of us has something to bring to the Lord. We all have our particular gift, which is marked by the story that is ours, where we have come from in life, the experience that has fashioned and formed us.

It is this that we are called to offer.

It is this that will be a pleasing gift to the Lord.

We have heard the Fathers' interpretation of the offerings presented and I have shared my little insight for what it is worth.

The question all of us must ask today is this: how can I make an offering of my life today? What is it that I have to offer? What is it that the Lord would be pleased to receive from me?

We might be surprised with the answer that we come up with.

After all, myrrh was a strange gift to offer to a baby! Myrrh was for embalming a dead body or again it was something to be mixed in with gall (bitter vinegar) and given as a drink to revive someone who was in death throes.

We don't always think of what the Lord awaits from us.

We are more inclined to think of what we wait for from Him!

In the light of what I have said this morning, might I suggest that we take a little time to pause and ask ourselves in the light of the living Word of God addressed to us today:

What do the gifts of the magi mean to me personally?

Which gift speaks most to me as the gift I am called to offer at this season of my life?

In other words: how can we imitate the magi as gift-givers?

The core questions we must face are:

Do I intend to offer my very self?

And to do this, will I first receive my life so that I can then dare to offer it as a gift to the Lord, as it is?

A further question might be: How will I do this?

The real call and challenge of today's feast, of course, is to enter into the mystery of Christ which is celebrated here.

That is always the call and the challenge of our liturgical celebrations. The Sacred liturgy seeks to lead us into the mystery of Christ and to see us commit ourselves to live that mystery.

And so another question that remains for all of us to answer in the course of this day is this:

How will I be an epiphany of the Lord for others? How will I be a manifestation of Christ for all my brothers and sisters in humanity?

It is to the whole world (represented by the magi drawn from diverse nations) that we are called to make Christ known.

We are called to be an epiphany of God's own self-giving, saving, love in the world in which we live.

Isaiah reminds us once again this morning that we are called to be *a light for the nations*.

The star mentioned in the story reminds us of the apostle's call to *shine out like bright shining stars in this darkened world*: bright shining stars which point to the Day-Star who is Christ!

It is today that the epiphany is to be experienced by us and made manifest through us.

I leave the last word to St Leo the Great:

Dearly beloved, the day on which Christ first showed himself to the Gentiles as the Saviour of the world should be held in holy reverence among us. we should experience in our hearts the same joy as the three wise men felt when the sign of the new star led them into the presence of the king of heaven and earth, and they gazed in adoration upon the one in whose promised coming they had

put their faith .. God's bounty toward us has been multiplied, so that even in our own times we daily experience the grace which belonged to those first beginnings.

May this day see all of giving a little moment of quiet time to offer what we are told the magi offered. May it seeing us take a moment in prayer to pay homage to the Lord; to signify our belonging to Him, our readiness to live in humble submission and life-giving obedience to Him, for this is really what paying homage is all about.

Amen!