

The Epiphany (A)  
(Isaiah 60:1-6 / Matthew 2:1-12)  
06.01.2020

When I considered what I might say in today's homily I found my thoughts turning to the *Prayer over the Offerings* used at the Eucharist of the Day for this Solemnity of the Epiphany. That prayer reads: *Look with favour, Lord, we pray, on these gifts of your Church, in which are offered now not gold or frankincense or myrrh, but He who by them is proclaimed, sacrificed and received, Jesus Christ.*

The prayer of the liturgy clearly invites us to focus on **Jesus Christ**, the One to whom the Magi's gifts were carried. We could lose sight of what or rather *who* really matters today by placing too much emphasis on the Magi. They were simply the bearers of the gifts carried to the Infant. Even too much thought about the gifts carried to the Christ-child could distract us. The Magi and their gifts are of lesser importance than the person of Jesus Christ! The Offertory Prayer would have us focus on the offering made by Jesus.

**Christ-Jesus – and His offering – should be our primary concern as we gather this morning to celebrate Eucharist.**

Moreover, in the context of this Eucharistic celebration we should recall that **we are called to make the offering of our lives, with, in, and through that of Jesus Christ.** A real and meaningful self-offering is meant to take place in our hearts every time we lay the gifts of bread and wine upon the Holy Table for consecration. As the bread and wine are presented to the Lord, to be transformed by His consecrating Spirit, so we are called to present our lives to God, and, within each of our lives, to offer for the Lord's glory and the benefit of others, the many gifts which have been bestowed upon us by God's graciousness.

That being said, I want to throw out a very important question for each one of us to try to answer today: what gifts have I received from God? The reason this question must be asked is that we cannot make a conscious offering of what we do not know we possess. In the process of answering the question I have thrown out, an initial step is required of us. It is to be able to say with the psalmist, in all simplicity and full truth: *I thank You, Lord, for the wonder of my being.*

Stemming from our initial acknowledgement that our very life is itself God's gift to us, we must go on to discern what particular gifts pertain to our unique incarnation, so that we may put these at the Lord's service in a bid to glorify Him with our whole.

We all have many personal gifts. Whether or not we are aware of them is another matter! The sad reality is that so many of us lack enough self-awareness to grasp and appreciate the multiple ways in which we have been gifted by God.

If I hear a call addressed to us to recognise the ways in which the Lord has blessed us individually, this is due to the missionary dimension of today's celebration. The gifts bestowed upon each one of us are meant to be used for the upbuilding of *the body*, the Church. Our personal gifts colour the contribution we have to make to the Church's mission to the world.

The blessing each one has received is vital for everybody else in our interconnected world. When we recognise this to be true then we find ourselves able to rejoice in and live out our lives freely and generously. Moreover, we find that we can allow ourselves to be touched and blessed by the gifts and blessings which others have to share with us.

There is a prayer from the reflections of St John Henry Newman which comes to mind as I consider each one's mission in life. In a prayer he composed on this subject, Newman states: *God has created me (that is, all of us) to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.* We could change the wording there and arrive at the same basic insight. Namely, that, in creating each one of us, God gifted us in a definite and uniquely personal way. Newman then reminds us that we all have a specific task when he has us say to God in prayer: *I have my mission.*

St John Henry Newman realises that our personal mission can sometimes elude us and may even be beyond our comprehension. He recognises that it happens that we are used in ways that we might not see, but which are all important for others. And so, with realism, Newman goes on to state: *I may never know what it (my specific mission) is in this life, but I shall be told in the next.* Clearly, the gifts God has put into us have been tailored to us – to our specific life situations. But, they are not meant for our own good alone. The Lord would always have us deploy our gifts for the good, well-being, and even the honour of others... remembering that what we do for others always, ultimately, serves to glorify God.

In this world no one and nothing can be considered cut off from others around them – and, indeed, the creation of which they are an element. We are, and everything is, part of one great connected whole. There is a real inter-connectedness in the created order – even though many seem to want to deny this. (Climate change is just one phenomenon that bears witness to the effect of denial in respect to the inter-connectedness of all things.)

As for the Church... well, she is essentially a *mystery of communion* and, as such, she has a vital role to play in the world. The Church has for mission to bear witness to the importance of inter-personal relationships which are meant to be lived harmoniously, in the grace of diversified unity.

Newman's prayer stresses the notion of inter-connectedness and spiritual communion with the following reminders in the prayer he composed: *I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work.*

As I have already said, the good we accomplish can elude us at times. Frequently, we have no idea of the impact our lives can have upon other people. We can bring Christ to others; we can be Christ for them... without our ever realising it. Again Newman reminds us of this: *I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments.*

Since each one of us has *a particular purpose*, it would be a good for us during the course of this day to reflect upon just what our purpose in life might be.

The *Offertory Prayer* for the Vigil Eucharist of this Solemnity makes it clear that by the offerings we bring to the Holy Table – what the liturgical formulation calls *the fruits of our lives* – we are called *to render praise to the Lord*, and also *advance our own salvation*.

Intimately linked to advancing *our own salvation* is the call to advance the salvation of the whole world. A blending of a formula used in the French liturgy with that of our English translation captures this idea. Our response to the *Orate Fratres* has us speak of making our offering at the Eucharist: to the praise and glory of God's name, for our own good and that of all God's Holy Church... to which the French liturgy adds: and for the salvation of the whole world.

It is in the frame of mind and heart I have been outlining in this morning's reflection so far that we are called to live each and every Eucharist and not least that of this Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

The Epiphany is a great celebration of the *Mystery of the Church as the Bride of Christ*. The liturgy sings of *the Church being wedded to her Lord* through His Epiphany. In accord with all that the Bible has to teach us, when it employs the symbol of the wedding feast to describe God's relationship with humanity, we must remember that the *Messianic Banquet, the Great Wedding Feast, is open to all*.

Hence the liturgy of this day also strongly affirms the importance of the mandate given to the Church by Christ and its universal scope: *Go out into the whole world to proclaim the Gospel*.

In today's feast, if emphasis is placed upon Christian outreach to the nations, it is also placed upon the Church's welcoming and integration of the gifts of so many cultures into her bosom. This is signified by the variety of gifts carried to the Christ-child by the Magi. The Magis' gifts came from their cultural background; their offerings symbolised their respective cultures coming to Christ and honouring Him, as they paid homage to the child.

In the gospel story we read today, the variety of the Magis' gifts reminds us that we all have different gifts to bring to the Lord and to share with others. Even where we seemingly share the same gift with other people, there will be a particular tone, a special accent, a distinct flavour, to the way in which we give flesh to it.

Paul insists in Romans 12 that *we all have different gifts according to the grace which God has given to be used appropriately*. Each one of us will use his or her gift in our own specific manner, with our own personal genius, as it were.

St Peter speaks in his First Letter of how we are to be *like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serving one another with whatever gift each of us has received*.

Mind you, neither our own or other people's recognition of our gifts is enough when it comes to living giftedness. Along with the **recognition** of our own gifts, or those of other people, there must also be a **reception** of these gifts. We have to **receive** the gifts given to us by God. There is a call for us to embrace, receive and accept our gifts so as to be able to share them with others in turn.

I suspect that for many of us – even though we will have assented to what we have heard here this morning – there may be in a corner of our hearts such a sense of our existential poverty that we are inclined to wonder what we could ever offer to the Lord and why He would even be interested in what we have to bring to Him.

Aware of that, let me try to bring this morning's meditation towards its conclusion by drawing upon a well-known Christmas carol – *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*. This well-known Christmas song is based upon Christina Rossetti's 19<sup>th</sup> century poem entitled, *A Christmas Carol*. It muses:

*What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring a lamb,  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part, –  
**Yet what can I give Him,  
Give my heart!***

Another hymn-writer's words echo in the depths of my being as I hear the invitation addressed to us to give the Lord our hearts. I think of the words of Matthew Bridges' early nineteenth century hymn which has us sing:

***My God accept my heart this day***

***And make it wholly Thine***

Those would be appropriate words to use as we renew the offering of our lives to the Lord in today's wonderful celebration of the Epiphany.

Matthew's Bridges' hymn lyrics go on to have us say:

***That I from Thee no more may stray***

***No more from Thee decline.***

Like the Wise Men, may we not stray! May the road we take in life be the way that the Lord would have us follow! The important thing for us is to listen to the Lord's instructions in regard to the direction to be given to our lives.

Right along the way, may we glorify the Lord by our whole way of being, so that, in the end, we pay Christ homage for all eternity in the spirit of adoration.

Contemplative adoration is essential to the spirit of this feast. May we be led into it today, remembering that adoration is the spirit in which we are called to live our eternal life in God's presence!

Amen!