

Sermon for Epiphany

Mother Emma

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

A fable for Epiphany

There were once three men; men of enviable wisdom and intellectual curiosity.

They had dedicated their whole lives to investigating and explaining the secret mysteries which they believed were hidden in the universe they saw around them, but which they also believed could be uncovered by the power of man's intellect.

As well as their intelligence and skill, each one of them had another influence on their experience of life, one which led them constantly to see the world from their own particular perspective.

The first wise man had been fortunate enough to inherit great wealth.

He was free to study the stars and the creation, to spend his life in the pursuit of academic excellence, without ever having to worry about how it might feel to experience poverty or the need to place his entire trust in God's providence.

The second man was a priest.

He served year after year in holy temples, where he burned sweet-smelling incense before the altars, and was able to demonstrate his own piety and devotion, whilst no longer needing to come into contact with the ritually unclean, or those who struggled with life outside the rarefied atmosphere of the Temple.

In time, his rigorous religious practice, coupled with the status which his position brought him, seemed almost to take him further and further from the vivid and poignant sense of God's presence which had first called him to the religious life.

The third wise man's study of creation had become orientated towards his own well-being.

A lifelong sufferer from pain and sickness, he used his acquired knowledge to study the healing properties of plants and minerals, constantly searching for ways in which to soothe his pain, even temporarily.

All three were men held in the highest esteem, blessed with a level of education, knowledge and understanding not accorded to many, and yet they felt the constant, unsettling sense that their lives were not quite as complete or as fulfilling as they could have been.

As they studied the movements of the stars and the planets, all three, from their different settings and homelands, recognised the appearance and trajectory of a new star – possibly a comet, which seemed to be making its way across the sky towards the tiny country of Judea.

They saw in it the proclamation, not only of a new king, but of a huge and significant change in the unfolding history of the world.

Moved by what they saw and felt, each man set out on a long and arduous journey, to try to discover what it was they had spotted, and how this might affect the human race of which they were part.

Each one took with them the things they held most dear – those they felt they needed to sustain them on the journey: whether money, symbols of religious devotion, or powerful painkillers.

Somewhere along the way, they discovered one another, all travelling in the same direction, following the same mysterious star, on a voyage of hope and discovery which they thought would lead them to greater and more impressive wisdom and understanding than any of their rivals had ever achieved.

But to their astonishment, the star led them to a dirty stable, to a very ordinary couple with a tiny newborn baby.

Yet despite the doubts and confusion which this discovery raised in their minds, somehow, deep in their hearts, they could feel that this was the endpoint, and the climax of their pilgrimage.

They knelt before the child, recognising in him a vulnerability, and yet a glory like no other, and they were moved to offer to this new family all of those precious items they had clung to throughout their travels, the money, the religious symbols and the protection from pain.

As they did so they found they had suddenly stripped away the high defensive barriers they had erected in order to shield themselves from having to experience need, or spiritual doubt, or physical suffering.

As they laid their gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – those symbols of their self-orientation, at the feet of the tiny, vulnerable baby in the dirty stable, they experienced for the first time the purity and joy of a simple, undefended, humble and wholehearted faith.

They offered up to God their trust, their hope and their faithful commitment, and in that moment, (even though they later had to admit that, wise as they were, they had never quite understood what happened there), their self-sacrifice, inspired by the sight of the child, slowly soothed their anxieties; and took away their sense that the only thing they could ultimately rely on was their own gifts and strengths.

That Epiphany, the Three Wise Men discovered that faced with insecurity, doubt or suffering, it is the stripping away of our man-made defences and supports, and the opening up and dedicating of our own hearts to the Incarnate God which will ultimately bring us true peace and hope for the future which lies ahead.

Amen