

Homily Epiphany of the Lord Sunday 3rd January, 2010.

Mass Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-2, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

I remember an old friar called Brother Jonathan, who had a very sweet tooth. Jonathan couldn't stand vegetables, and said water was only for animals. He preferred wine – or gin and tonic if he was lucky. He always thought meals should start with a pudding and if there was any room perhaps you could go on to something else afterwards. I remember him saying to me one day that there was always a measure of disappointment for him in the gospel texts when it said that on the night in which He was betrayed Jesus took *bread*. He was hanging out for the great day when some ancient scroll would be discovered, being thoroughly verified as to its unquestionable authenticity through very careful carbon dating, in which it would be firmly established that on the night of His betrayal Jesus took a very large piece of black forest gateau! Then Jonathan could have black forest gateau every day – even Ash Wednesday! In fact on some days it would be obligatory!

I tell you that amusing little tale, because in some small way I have a sort of regret about today's reading from the gospel of Matthew. I would like it to say that going into the house they saw the child with His Mother Mary, and were bitterly disappointed. I want it to say that because part of me thinks they were. These men were, according to different interpretations of the text, astrologers, and unlikely to be poor themselves. They could afford to travel and obviously could afford to pay for the material back-up that such a long journey would require. They were used to studying the movements of the planets, which required a lot of education, which presumably didn't come cheap, and in the ancient world they were looked upon as important people and very few political and military leaders would take serious decisions without consulting them.

They were looking for someone whom their astrological directives indicated would be powerful and famous – a king. So, of course, they go to Jerusalem, the capital. They enquire of a possible birth among those in Jerusalem's high society who were themselves well connected, and so would, presumably, be more likely to be in the know. Their obvious status as wise and learned men caused them to be taken seriously, so seriously that their enquiries led them into the company of King Herod himself. Now if they had studied Herod's personal horoscope they might have re-considered his invitation. Caesar Augustus said of Herod that his pigs were safer than his sons. And Caesar wasn't a paragon of virtue himself. King Herod wasn't the sort of guy you would invite over for an evening. His brutality was locally well known and feared. He murdered three of his own sons because he suspected that they had an eye on his crown. His rather meek questioning as to the whereabouts of the future king is of course totally false as his later murder of the Innocents reveals.

The astrologers after their meeting then set out on a journey, led by a single bright light in the dark night sky – it's cold. It's a strange journey. It's a journey in the opposite direction, away from the capital, away from the seat of government, away from those with power and influence, away from security and wealth. It's a journey into obscurity, into anonymity. What must they have felt sitting on their camels and horses as they trundled and bumped along in the dark to who knows where?

And they were led to a little house in a small village, to a young mother and her young husband, a carpenter. It's all desperately ordinary. Had they travelled so far for so little? Had all their careful calculations been totally wrong? I like to think that the small hovel of a house where Mary and Joseph and the baby lived took them completely by surprise. Even more surprised possibly were Mary and Joseph watching these characters falling on their knees and offering their strange gifts, these offerings bringing back to them all the extraordinary and wonderful promises of the Archangel, that they were still trying to take in and make sense of.

We get a picture here of how God manifests Himself – manifestation, it's what the word Epiphany means. The life of Jesus of Nazareth was so basic, so small, so unspectacular, for the most of it. He spent 90% of His life in complete obscurity – no sermons, no miracles, no crowds. He walked through the village and no one turned a head. People bumped into Him and moved on lost in their daily banter, while the Divine Word passed by unnoticed behind them. The holy name before which every knee shall bow was yelled across the street by other boys, without an ounce of irreverence, because He was only Joseph's kid, just one of them. He listened to the crude jokes of other men, that went uncensored because His ears were nothing special. He spent hours mending broken fittings and making simple furniture, alone in his workshop, and no one came in for spiritual direction. He was Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, whom everyone knew – nice guy, nothing special. This is why the locals were so amazed, and disgusted, when His public ministry began among them. *“Where did He get all this wisdom and these special powers? Isn't He the carpenter's son, and aren't His Mother His brothers and sisters all here with us? Where did He get all this?”* And they found Him offensive. Thus we get a picture of how God manifests Himself. Those words of St. Paul come back to me. *“Though He was divine He emptied Himself....”* He emptied Himself. Why? To be with you. So that you would never feel empty, unimportant, abandoned, forgotten, and that what you imagine as your emptiness might in fact be the very place where He seeks to meet and embrace you.

God chose this ordinariness that we celebrate at this special time, to teach us something very special – that the ordinary is sacred, a meeting place. Everything is here now. This moment, this place, wherever I am is, paradoxically, both His hiding place and His place of disclosure, His epiphany. *“On the night in which He was betrayed He took bread.”* Whenever I say those words I think of them as: On the night in which He was betrayed He took me to Himself. He took me and what goes to make up my little, inconsequential, unknown, anonymous life, and said – ‘This is my body.’ That's His message to you now. Our lives: Home – school – work – pub – gym – friends – shops – football – home – school – work etc etc are sacred to Him. Work, as well as Lourdes, is the place of pilgrimage, as is school, home, beach, shop, pub, restaurant, cinema, bed. There you will find Him. Here is where it all happens, wherever here is, however here feels, whatever here contains, because there is no other place in which He can manifest Himself than here, nor does He want to, than here. *“It's a wicked a perverse generation that looks for signs, the only sign that it will be given is the sign of Jonas,”* He says. Jonas was in the belly of the whale you remember for three days and three nights. He is speaking of His passion. The only sign of His presence that we can be sure of is His immersion, His burial within and His rising out of the ordinary in our lives. That's where He is. That's the place to meet Him. That's the place to be embraced by Him. Don't look for the miraculous as the place of His disclosure, look for the ordinary – then the ordinary becomes miraculous.

There is no more stupid nor futile journey than wanting to become a celebrity, or someone else. You are already a wonder, surrounded by wonders. We are sacred in our troubles, in our poverty of resources, and in our littleness. Though we stumble on in blind faith we are known. *“Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.”* We are sacred in our own unique personal misery. This is what Nazareth teaches us. We are already the beloved of the Bridegroom.

A message for today’s feast can be given in three small words – Be, Here, Now.

Be - who? Yourself.

Be where? – Here. Wherever that is.

Be here when? Now. Be here now, for that is where He is, and where He is there is everything I need.