

The Epiphany 2018

I am wondering if any here made New Year's resolutions? If so, have you already broken them, or will you remain steadfast in your desire to fulfil whatever it was you decided upon? It could be said that a 'dry' January or even Veganuary are laudable, but these tend to be temporary changes and are usually to do with self. Sometimes they are to do with materialism or self-image, and I suppose that the idea of a defined moment (understandably, the turning of the year) seems a good time to reflect and think about change. However, it must be said that it usually takes more to change oneself than a midnight call at the turn of the year - a given moment in calendar time will not necessarily bring the desired effect! I must admit that I have never made New Year's resolutions. Does this mean that I know myself too well?

More important to me is the sense of transformation which I try to remember daily, which I believe lies at the heart of our Faith. This transformation is something which leads to our spiritual growth and development, because if we become people with no goals or desire for change, our lives would be pale shadows of the fulness of life God calls us to experience through Jesus Christ. We are called to a life-long journey exploring the purpose of God's will for each of us. This radical journeying at its most profound is following in the steps of Christ in self-offering love to those we encounter on our life journey – the sense that we find our true selves not in focussing of self-directed efforts to improve ourselves. Does that sound daunting or even exhausting? And is journeying in such a way truly profitable or even desirable?

Matthew's account of the Magi's visit to the child Jesus which the Western Church celebrates on this Feast of the Epiphany, is the great marker he uses within his Infancy Narrative to illustrate the response of humanity to faith in Jesus Christ. Matthew's account is quite different from the light-filled one we find in Luke. It is dark – almost as if the Gospel writer wants to remind us of the flaws which beset the whole of humanity. We have doubting Joseph, alarmed at Mary's pregnancy; the brooding of Herod at the news he hears of a child's birth- power quailing against possible loss of prestige. The shadows deepen, leading to the flight to Egypt (and Matthew wants us to see this mirroring the story of a different Joseph, whose family follow him to Egypt). The Massacre of the Holy Innocents draw us to the Children of Israel who suffer such persecution throughout their history – something relevant here and now in 2019 - Matthew using the powerful imagery of a quote from Jeremiah to bring this home: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.' *Jer: 31: 15* An allusion to the Exodus is then made as we hear of Joseph returns with his family to his own land, where Nazareth become the home of 'the shoot from the stem of Jesse' (*Isaiah 11:1*) as Matthew tells us, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

So what of the Magi and their significance? The account is one completely centred on the life-changing revelation and encounter with the one John the Gospel writer calls, 'The Word made Flesh.' The Magi represent people seeking truth through the study of the stars and the like which they have undertaken. We should not see them as male relatives of Mystic Meg or Madame Petulengro on the end of the Palace Pier, but those seeking after the truth at the heart of life itself. This they find in the face of a child and transformation

through this encounter overwhelms them with joy. This is what a life lived in imitation of Christ offers, and the magi's gifts remind the reader of the way in which the earthy and divine are bound up in Jesus and that the Pascal mystery is at the heart of the Christian call to transformation.

As I have said, we all have a deep-seated desire to find fulfilment within our lives, yet usually this is explored in many ways which can never be satisfied. Look at the people whose stories we see on the television, in our papers or on new-feeds. I sometimes feel overwhelmed with sadness when children or young people find nothing but despair when viewing their own lives as they compared them to others. This turns fulfilment on its head and is toxic. Yet the joy that the Magi found manifested in Jesus was experienced because they were not focussing on themselves or comparing their lives with others.

Even you and I as Christians have a propensity to desire those things which we hope might lead us further towards God achieve the opposite. We should allow self-direction towards self-improvement become a God-led process; an adventure of faith, rather like that of the Magi's journey of life after their experience of overwhelming joy in encountering the Christ-child.

Matthew's Magi reminds us to always seek to orient ourselves towards the one who offers us true fulfilment through his example of selfless love, that as we too pay him homage, we may continually be led on a journey of transformation through our relationship with the lodestar of true joy and peace, Jesus Christ.



Journey of the Magi, mosaic, Basilica Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, ca. 6th c

Isaiah 60: 1-6

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;

but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you;

your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]

because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Ephesians 3: 1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you,³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.⁵ In former generations this mystery^[b] was not

made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power.⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to

the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,⁹ and to make everyone see^[c] what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in^[d] God who created all things;

¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.^[e] ¹³ I pray therefore that

you^[f] may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its

rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.'³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born.⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you

have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped

over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid

him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.