

EPIPHANY 2011/2019

THE MAGI (MT 2:1-12)

As we may recall the Magi were painted on the front of the basilica in Bethlehem, and because of which it was not destroyed by the Persians in 614 AD. When the Moslems invaded Palestine a century later the Caliph- having destroyed all the monasteries around- for some reason decided to spare this same basilica in Bethlehem. He promised not to treat it as a mosque, that only individual Moslems would pray there. Christians and Moslems prayed there side by side at Christmas for a long time (E.Hoade, *Guide to the Holy Land*, Jerusalem 1984, p.391). And it has just been announced that the basilica has now been completely renovated. A large increase in the number of pilgrims going there has also been recorded. This is very good news for the locals, especially the Christians there.

Universal witness

Why was the early Church so successful in making converts? How did people ever come to accept the Christian faith? There were competing gods and moralities everywhere in the Roman empire then. It seems that christianity was accepted principally because of the Person of Jesus; people found in him the physician of their souls, the way the truth and the life. The faith was lived out in small communities in which people found meaning and purpose for existence. Pliny the Younger (62 AD-113 AD) wrote to the emperor Trajan: “[This] my informers tell me was the whole of their crime or mistake, that they were accustomed to assemble on a stated day before dawn, and to say together a hymn to Christ as a god, and to bind themselves by an oath (sacrament- not to any crime but the contrary) -to keep from theft, robbery, adultery, breach of promise, and making free with deposits. After this they used to separate, and then to meet again for a meal, which was social and harmless. ...I felt no doubt that, whatever might be the character of their opinion, because of their stubborn and inflexible obstinacy, they deserved punishment.” “ However” - Pliny adds - “when trying to compel them to offer wine and incense to the emperor’s image or curse Christ nothing can compel a [true] Christian to do any of these things” (Quoted in J.H.Newman, *The Grammar of Assent* , p.363).

Christianity was preached as the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham at Genesis (12:3): “all the nations of the earth would bless themselves in you.” The promise was intended as good for all. It was a promise of happiness for all; the meaning and purpose of life was presented as peace and happiness for those who accepted it. The alternatives became redundant. Believing slaves and believing masters were both asking the same question, why they were born at all. It was not just an intellectual quest; it was looking for a way to live a meaningful life. In the Christian community they loved each other; they had the same values. They respected each other totally. They worshipped together and heard the same narratives and ideals Sunday by Sunday, sharing at the same table of the Lord. They supported each other by their continual presence; and they encouraged each other- with their skills and genius, with their various caring gifts. (The constant struggle to achieve this is well documented in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians).

To this day the local Church is normally a small group of people, helping each other, in a very small compass, with security, and making an epiphany of values by constancy, fidelity and open and discreet generosity. Christians do not look to the State for ideals. Christians are

delighted when they receive support for their ideals. But they do not worship at the shrine of fame, money, acceptance or social significance. Where believers can exert influence for good they do so, but they cannot force it. When Christians are not supported there are many martyrs to bear witness to the price they pay for their values. In 2018 forty Catholic missionaries were killed, mainly in Africa, 35 priests and four lay persons (*La Croix*, Jan 2nd 2019). Christianity is the most persecuted religion in many countries. Ecumenically we are all well aware of this now. There is an anti-persecution charity called *Open Doors UK and Ireland*. And The Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and the Anglican bishop of Truro are making proposals as to how the British government can support the 250 million Christians globally who are being persecuted (The Tablet, Jan th, 2019, p.28).

The Grand Scale

Religious freedom is a human right. Cardinal Newman reflected on the long and chequered history of the Church as benefiting the whole human race. He said: it imparted an intelligent notion about the Supreme God to millions who would have lived and died in irreligion, that it has raised the tone of morality wherever it has come, has abolished great and social anomalies and miseries, has elevated the female sex to its proper dignity, has protected the poorer classes, has destroyed slavery, encouraged literature and philosophy, and had a principal part in that civilising of human kind, which, with some evil, has still on the whole been productive of far greater good..” Christianity achieved success, Newman says: by the novel expedient of sanctity and suffering (p.353). Christians spoke of his invisible Presence and Protection here, and of vision and fruition of him hereafter....” “It was the thought of Christ, not a corporate body of doctrine, which inspired that zeal” (p.359). Putting it quite simply: people were converted because they loved Christ and loved each other in Christ. Christianity had its principal success among the poorer classes who had no power, influence, reputation or education. Love has no boundaries.

Conclusion

So on this feast of the Epiphany- this showing forth of Christ- we reflect on why we believe, and with whom we believe. We have so much to be grateful for. Saying thanks to God above all- and then to each other as we celebrate the Eucharist- this is the distinguishing feature of the Christian. Love is universal; we want everyone to love the good that we love, and to live it out day by day. Happy feast to you all. Amen.

Rev Richard J.Taylor
Spiritual Advisor, Matercare International
Boarbank Hall, Cumbria, UK