

Another Road: The Feast of the Epiphany (05.01.20) Matthew 2:1-12

Prayer:

“If music be the food of love, play on
give me excess of it.....”

Shakespeare’s famous opening line from his well loved comedy “Twelfth Night”. Today is twelfth night or the Eve of the Feast of the Epiphany, which we are celebrating this morning. In the early Catholic Church, this evening was an occasion for revelry where men dressed as women, women as men and servants as their masters. The world for a moment was turned topsy-turvy, upside down. This is reflected in Shakespeare’s play where cross dressing and almost identical twins, despite being brother and sister, cause confusion and mayhem. Shakespeare dares to travel on another road offering an alternative view of love and life.

No doubt confusion and mayhem was caused in the court of King Herod the Great when Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” Herod respected the visitors with their supposedly grand clothes and probably riding powerful Arabian horses. Wise men, sages, Magi, astrologers were advisers to Kings; some became Kings; they were influential and powerful. Now the one thing Herod could not tolerate was anyone who threatened or challenged his position. However he was not called “great” for nothing. He had kept peace in Judea for many years, much to the delight of the Romans, in whose hands he was a mere pawn. He was a great visionary and a quite brilliant architect. He was generous. On one occasion he ceased from taxing people so they could survive and on another he melted down gold in order to buy corn for his starving subjects. He knew how to court people and win over their support. But so paranoid was he about people plotting against him that he murdered his wife and mother-in-law and assassinated three of his sons. And we now know what he was about to leash on Jewish babes of two years-old and under. No wonder he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod had hoped the wise men would return to tell him where this new King of the Jews had been born. But nor were they called “wise” for nothing. They rejected the way of Herod, the way of this world, the way of power and tyrannous rule, of wealth and the love of money. They did not return to Herod; they left for their own country by another road. How many Herods have there been throughout history? How many living and ruling today in this world? Now through the birth of Jesus, we have been called to journey on another road. The Kingdom of God is a world redefined, an alternative world for alternative people with alternative politics.

The story of the journey of the wise men to visit the infant Jesus has captivated minds throughout history. Embellishments have been added. Artists of the like of Botticelli, Brueghel, Leonardo, Tintoretto, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt and many others have depicted them as European, African and Asian, black and white, old and young, bearded and clean shaven, riding camels and horses, men and women. You may however have heard that “Three Wise Women would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, swept the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts.” Whatever your thoughts and beliefs of this amazing event one important point stands out that the alternative road, the way of the Kingdom is for all, is fully inclusive. The whole world is symbolised in the nativity scene - the local in the shepherd, the international in the wise men, the whole of the created order in the presence of the animals. This royal birth breaks down and shatters the walls of division between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, black and white, men and women, rich and poor. We are all travellers on another road. Jane Williams writes, “In Jesus Christ we have a common humanity. From that certainty, we can explore difference as a gift, drawing us closer, not driving us apart.”

So how can we take another road like the wise men? What will we find as we journey? How can we come to recognise God?

I would imagine a great deal of effort, energy and courage was invested in the wise men’s decision to begin their journey and to finally reach their destination. They poured over verses in the Hebrew scripture; they

studied the stars, weighing things up, before stepping out with courage. Their journey was no doubt rigorous:

“A cold coming we had of it” TS Eliot writes, and later “With the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly.” Imagine a journey on horse back today from modern Iran to Bethlehem, about 970 miles as the crow flies. You’d travel through war torn Iraq and Syria and arrive to find a 25 foot wall around Bethlehem, preventing you getting through without finding a check point. Pretty tough! Courage is an important ingredient in following another road. Malcolm Guite writes of the wise men:

“Their courage gives our questing hearts a voice
To seek, to find, to worship, to rejoice.”

Our journey in coming to recognise God is relational - we travel with others, we travel together. Those wise men would have been glad of each other’s company, discovering a new relationship between each other. God is always with us and as we travel, we learn to recognise the presence of God in others. We travel, like the wise men, with humility. Why should such men of dignity and wisdom, travel so far, experience so many difficulties, worship and offer their gifts before a small impoverished child with no previous noble history? We also seek, we find, we worship, offering our gifts with humility.

It is quite significant that the wise men return to their own country. How tempting it might have been to stay and watch the small child grow, for we are told “they were overwhelmed with joy.” They are charged by God to return home, becoming an outpost, a witness to the joy they have experienced. When they arrived home they would have changed. Their worlds would have been turned upside down by the radical events of the incarnation. They would have challenged their previous existence of reading the stars, of magic and paganism. They would have rejected the values of Herod and the known world. They would have become strangers to many, even though they were home.

St Francis says to recognise God we must “start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” So what is necessary for us to do now? Finding faith often

comes with willpower. So let's travel another road as Howard Thurman, the 20th Century civil rights leader explains:

When the song of the angels is stilled

When the star in the sky has gone

When the Kings and Princes are home

When the shepherds are back with their flocks

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost

To heal the broken

To feed the hungry

To release the prisoner

To rebuild the nations

To bring peace among people

To make music in the heart

Bill Pattinson

01.01.20

