

EPIPHANY 2024

Once the angels left the shepherds Luke explains: “...they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them...And the shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all they had heard and seen...”

Wonder, glorifying, and praising. These were the spontaneous reactions to what they had seen and heard. In a similar way the Magi who had travelled such a long distance to find the infant king had come not to question, debate or to even specifically to find answers, but ‘to do him homage’. Once they had reached their destination Matthew tells us ‘...falling to their knees they did him homage’. The presence of Jesus – God made man - first and foremost leads us to worship and adoration. Why is that important? Because it is in adoration, in worship that we surrender to Him and are most ourselves. In worship and adoration, we experience the power of transformation.

In his homily on Christmas night Pope Francis made mention of this when he said:

Worship is the way to embrace the Incarnation. For it is in silence that Jesus, the Word of the Father, becomes flesh in our lives. Let us do as they did, in Bethlehem, a town whose name means “House of Bread”. Let us stand before him who is the Bread of Life. Let us rediscover worship, for to worship is not to waste time, but to make our time a dwelling-place for God. It is to let the seed of the Incarnation bloom within us; it is to cooperate in the work of the Lord, who, like leaven, changes the world. To worship is to intercede, to make reparation, to allow God to realign history.

Let those words sink in for a moment and let them find a home within each of us. ‘to worship is not to waste time, but to make our time a dwelling-place for God’. How very important this is. How often though do we put the emphasis in the wrong place. ‘What am I going to get out of this time of prayer, or the Mass’ we ask. No, our motivation is to allow this time, this encounter to become ‘a dwelling place for God’. It is all about Him not about us.

God desires to give and so Pope Francis reminds us that our worship is not about performance. In the fourth Preface we pray: “You have no need of our praise...Our prayer adds nothing to your greatness but makes us grow in your grace.” I’ve never had the courage when greeting people after Mass and they say things like “It was a lovely service”. I have never had the courage to ask what was lovely about it? Was it the music, the homily, the atmosphere, a real sense that God was present and moving among us? What makes worship lovely? Of course, the music, homily and the fact that the celebrant lets the liturgy itself speak rather than imposing himself upon it is important, but surely there is more.

Pope Francis points to this ‘more’ when he said: ‘It is to let the seed of the Incarnation bloom within us; it is to cooperate in the work of the Lord, who, like leaven, changes the world...to allow God to realign history’. It was for this reason I reminded us at Mass on Christmas Eve that we cannot remain the same after the Word of God has been proclaimed over us, after that

Word has become flesh and made His home within us - the transformation has taken place as we have received HIM. The seed of change that aligns our history to God's, must be allowed to bloom.

The beautiful Epiphany hymn of JSB Monsell comes to mind:

*O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
kneel and adore him the Lord is his name.*

The Magi came to worship and it is in adoration that we enter the great mystery of God, and the mystery enters us. There is no more privileged moment of encounter than when we come together for worship. "*Arise shine out, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*" Epiphany reminds us as St John Paul II wrote in '*Orientalis Lumen*': '*that one draws close to this presence above all by letting oneself be taught by an adoring silence.*' "*Arise shine out, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*" It is in our worship, in our adoring silence that we are brought into contact with the divine reality, with the light that has shone upon us and shines within us.

That is why the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught that there should be full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy – this is not a spectator sport. When we enter the liturgy, when we enter upon adoration we are taken into His divine presence, no matter whether the homily is sterile, the music insufferable and the celebrant a total distraction! We are made new as the Preface today reminds: "*...by the glory of his immortal nature.*"

Go back to that opening chapter of Genesis. The story of creation. Morning comes and evening comes and there is as it were a great procession of creation, but who comes at the end of that great drama, that great procession of creation? Human beings. Just as the celebrant comes at the end of the procession at Mass. What is the role of humanity? To lead all creation in the great song of praise to the creator. Worship leads us to turn to the creator and the whole of the scriptures reveal what happens when Israel, when we worship the wrong thing, when we face the wrong direction, when we worship the creature rather than the creator. There is disaster.

The Magi came to do Him homage because they recognised Him as the centre of all things.

Recall the meaning of these two words I have used, adoration and worship. In Latin 'adoratio' that is 'ad oris' means mouth to mouth, aligned to God. And trouble and confusion come in life when we face the wrong direction. Adoration orientates us towards and leads to right praise, right worship. God is the focus. Likewise, the word worship, which comes from an old English word 'worth-ship'. What is of the greatest value to you? The protestant theologian Paul Tillich said that all you need to know about a person you can learn from observing what they value most because you will then see what they truly worship. What is of the greatest worth, as Jesus mentions in the Gospel, will become the ordering principal of your life, it guides us and forms our choices. Hence it is in our desire to do homage that we put God and his truth at the very centre. Adoration and worship are when we are most ourselves.

It reminds me of the experience of Thomas Merton who after his first retreat at Gethsemane Abbey could say: 'I found the still point around which the whole country revolves without knowing it.'

*O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
kneel and adore him the Lord is his name.*

Epiphany truly is the manifestation of God. But then every Mass, every occasion of worship and adoration is the opportunity for God to manifest Himself. Let me conclude with words from Pope Francis yesterday as he celebrated the Epiphany:

"Brothers and sisters, like the Magi, let us raise our eyes to the heavens, let us set out to seek the Lord, let us bow our hearts in adoration. Looking to the heavens, setting out on a journey and adoring....May the Lord grant us this grace, above all the grace to know how to adore."

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

7 January 2024