

Homily – Epiphany 2019

“The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One Sunday morning, I was listening to the Sunday programme on Radio 4 and there was a discussion about the impact of the last couple of decades upon people’s attitude to religion. During it, one of the fashionable folk who has made a career out of knocking religious faith was quoted. “Science flew men to the moon, religion flew men into the twin towers”, he said. And so, with a glib phrase, a smirk and a pirouette, the life of faith of millions throughout the ages is consigned to the dustbin of human ignorance and God is definitively made redundant or declared dead. I have to say that I don’t agree with him, the writer of the quotation, that is. There is bad religion out there, and there is bad science. Human beings have a tendency to get the wrong end of the stick or, on the other hand, to get the right end of the stick and use it wrongly. But the journey of faith is a journey of learning and human beings, history teaches us, learn right action and moral probity through keeping company with God and not by rejecting him.

Let’s be clear about this: faith is not a word, and not a slogan. Faith is not a political party. It is an intimate relationship with the God who created us and who dwells within us. It is characterized by worship and obedience. Just because you say you are Christian, or Muslim, or Jewish, or Buddhist or Hindu, it does not mean that everything you do is blessed by God or is even in accordance with your belief system. Sometimes actions which purport to have religious inspiration are actually a form of inhuman, irreligious blasphemy.

We all, in matters of faith and life, start where we are. We are more or less disposed to good actions, more or less caring, more or less holy. We are who we are. We are helped by the commandments of our faith, in our case by the perfect teachings of Christ and his Church. These help us to orient our fragile aspirations to goodness by giving us signposts, moral and otherwise, towards the good life. This is a level of the usefulness of religious faith that even some atheists respect, but far more important than this is the empowering vision that faith brings to the believer. This is the lesson that the wise men teach us. They had a vision which came to them as a gift, and they followed it. Faith is the pursuit of a vision, and the following of a call which we hear deep in our hearts. It is not about falling for a set of ideas, even though that may be where some people start! The vision of God which bursts in upon us is a sacrament of love

which is transforming of the human personality. It brings both knowledge of the path to follow, and the assurance of the strength and courage to follow it. It is an indwelling power that changes our human weakness into a courageous integrity that helps us in every detail of our daily lives. Faith is not just a word, it is not even just a passionate commitment, it is a transforming making real of love that carries all before it. Whatever sort of Christian that we are, all that matters is the foundation of the faith that we claim. Is it a falling in love with the God who calls to us? Yes. Is it a commitment to a transforming vision? Yes.

I have always been moved by the dialogue at the beginning of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* between Evangelist and the Pilgrim:

The man...looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, Whither must I fly? Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, Do you see yonder wicket-gate? The man said, No. Then said the other, Do you see yonder shining light? He said, I think I do...

Yes, the vision may be sketchy, and it may seem out of reach at times, but we will always prosper by following it. The pursuit of the light is the essence of our faith. Our understanding, our personality, our integrity, all have a part to play in the pilgrimage of life, but they are nothing without the vision of the shining light of faith that draws us on. The wise men teach us to tend the vision thing, to follow the light, and to keep it before us as we go upon our way.

Faith may not fly us to the moon, but the moon is an awfully arid and inhospitable place. Most of us would prefer to follow the star in our hearts to the place where God is waiting for us. In that place, when we have found him, we learn through worship and obedience to live a life worthy of our King. We bring precious personal gifts to him: of gold (wealth, both material and spiritual), frankincense (worship and obedience) and myrrh (sacrifice) and by giving them we find that we are the ones that are enriched. There will be those who whisper in our ears, as in the ears of the Magi in Eliot's poem 'the Journey of the Magi' that 'this is all folly', but we shall bring the glory of God into human life and living despite them. We shall keep the faith, and transform the world. Amen.