

Some years ago the front page of the Church times had a picture drawn by a modern artist. I remember failing to see in its lines the face of Christ even when it was pointed out to me. After some days of looking at it and studying it I finally made out the features and the face became visible to me. It was now so apparent to me that this was a drawing of a face that I could not understand how I had failed to see it and I could not look at it and not see the face.

Our understanding is determined by what we know and the thing we know about best is being human. In the incarnation God was revealed to us in terms we could understand.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, is the time when Christians focus on the revelation of Christ's true nature. It's the time when our

thoughts and worship are directed towards the recognition that the human Jesus is also divine. He is The Word made flesh. At a specific moment in time the eternal creator of all things became one with his creation.

The Magi looked in the obvious place for a great king, a grand palace, they were lead to a humble abode and found a helpless infant not sitting on a throne but on his mother's knee. They recognised in the child the one they had travelled far in search of, the one they had longed to see, and they fell down and worshiped Him.

The Bishop of Ravenna nearly 1600 years ago said this, "Today the Magi gaze in deep wonder at what they see, heaven on earth, earth in heaven, humankind in God, God in human flesh, one whom the universe cannot contain enclosed in a tiny body. As they look they do not question, as their

symbolic gifts bear witness: incense for God, Gold for King, myrrh for the one who is to die.”

Let us just briefly examine these gifts more closely for they are very much about the recognition of who Jesus really is.

Gold is a precious metal which does not tarnish it is highly valued and perhaps one could describe it as the king of metals. It was the sort of gift one would expect to give to a King. In this gift we recognise Christ as The King of Kings born to reign, not by strength but by love.

Incense was used in worship both Jewish and Gentile, long before Jesus was born. We are told in Exodus chapter 30¹ that God instructed Moses to make incense using Frankincense to “be holy to the Lord”. We know it was used by the priests during offerings to YHWH in Temple worship. Its

¹ Exodus Ch 30 v 34-37

smoke symbolic not only of God's Holiness but of the prayers rising to Him.

The Latin word for priest is pontifex meaning bridge builder; part of the priestly vocation is to be a bridge builder to bring people closer to God. In the gift of frankincense, we recognise the divinity of Jesus, acknowledge His holiness and hail Him our Great High Priest who opened the way for us into God's presence.

Myrrh was an ingredient in anointing oil and we are told wine mingled with myrrh² was offered to Jesus on the cross and it was also used to anoint the bodies of the dead.

In the gift of Myrrh we recognise Jesus as the one who was to die to save human kind and bring us back into a right relationship with God.

² Mark 15 v 23

At His mothers knee, Christ is recognised and acclaimed by Gentile sages to be the true king, the perfect High priest and the Saviour of all humankind.

Epiphany is about recognition, it is about seeing something which has been hidden, and recognising it for what it is.

So the visitation of the Magi, is about seeing who Jesus really is.

The wise men who came from the east were gentiles and that is important for us, because so are we. They followed a star faithfully and with perseverance until they found and worshiped the King of Kings. Their journey was at the worst time of the year, it was long and hard, but they did not delay or make excuses. When they did not find him where they expected they did not turn around and go home they went on.

We are called to make the journey to find and to recognise Him; so that we too may kneel at his feet and bring all we have to offer, our obedience, our worship, and our prayers for healing and forgiveness.

There is a story about the wise men which runs something like this. There were three wise men who followed a star, eventually they were lead to the place where Jesus was. As they bent to go through the door a fourth man was accidentally pushed inside with them. He was not a king, he was not even a respectable citizen. Under his arm he carried a brown paper parcel tied up with string which contained all his possessions. When the wise men had opened up their treasures and presented the Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh the fourth man was pushed forward and invited to offer his gift. He shrunk back clutching the parcel tightly to him and muttered that it belonged to him and that it was private and not fit for a

king to see. As he did so the string broke and the tatty ordinary contents spilled out all over the floor at Jesus feet. It was all the man had and as he knelt on the floor with his things Jesus accepted them and him. And the man too recognised and worshiped Christ.

We are told that after the wisemen had given their gifts they departed but they went back another way. Like them we must rise from worship and go out into the world. But like the wisemen we too must go by another way for once we have experienced our moment of epiphany things will never be the same again, for Christ, who came to be a light to lighten the gentiles leads us, and we must follow Him.