

A CROWD OF FOLLOWERS ON THE WAY

Isaiah 60. 1-6
Ephesians 3. 1-12
Matthew 2. 1-12

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

As some of you know, I am a great lover of art. If ever you visit the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., I recommend that you take the time to look up an extraordinary 15th-century Italian painting. It is called the *Adoration of the Magi*, and it was begun by Fra Angelico and finished later by Filippo Lippi. The painting is actually called a *tondo* (from the Italian), because it is a huge circular painting; and it rests inside an ornate gold-painted frame. The work of art by Fra Angelico and Lippi depicts the event we celebrate today, the Feast of the Epiphany.

If you do go to the National Gallery (and if you don't, please do have a look at this painting on Google), you will undoubtedly be struck by the startling profusion of human beings who come to adore the Christ-child. They seem to be streaming in from all over the place. Behind the Magi on the left, a large procession of their attendants continues to arrive, passing through an arch; and to the right of the Magi, more of their party is seen to be arriving, riding on camels and horses. Elsewhere, coming through a gateway in the walls, one sees a number of townsfolk, who are all looking and pointing to the Nativity scene; and at the top of the hill, a large crowd has assembled and attempts to descend a narrow path in order to get a better look at the Holy Family.

Curiously, standing atop a wall and apart from the crowds is a line of five pale men wearing loincloths. Art historians have never been in agreement about their identity and purpose in the painting. Some claim that the youths were placed in the painting

because of the artists' preoccupation with human anatomy, which was an obsession for Italian artists until Michelangelo; but when one looks closely, it becomes apparent that these youth are emaciated and gaunt. The fact that they are nearly naked suggests that they are probably beggars; and their very white, pale skin suggests that they are lepers. Whoever they are, they are cut off from the rest of the people. They are excluded from society. In spite of their miserable state, the youths' hands are raised in a gesture of astonishment and praise. They cannot help but be caught up in the joy of the moment. As do the Magi and the crowd around them, these leprous paupers look toward the infant Jesus with expectation; and they respond to him in worship.

One of the ways to understand the Feast of the Epiphany is to listen to what St Paul declares in our appointed text from his letter to the Ephesians. He suggests that, in our Lord, something that was previously hidden is now being revealed. I quote: 'In former generations this mystery (of Christ) was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (3. 5-6).

In other words, there are no longer any 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in Christianity. Now, even Gentiles can become Christians! In the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, a divine mystery is being worked out; and the categories of 'Jew' and 'Gentile' no longer make any sense. The Christian family and its divisions are being healed. We are, all of us, on a path from our separate places to a new way of being together.

The Magi's pilgrimage to find our Lord reminds us how important journeys are in the life of faith. In the earliest days of the Christian Church, the group of people who followed Christ was simply known as those who belonged to 'the Way' (Acts 9. 2). In Greek, the word *hodos* (ὁδός) means 'way' in the sense of a travelled way, or a

road. But like all words, the word *hodos* soon took on metaphorical connotations. Just as today we talk of a ‘spiritual path or journey’, so then ‘The Way’ meant a faith process, a course of conduct, a manner of thinking, feeling, acting or deciding. In the very earliest days, Christians got it right: they thought of themselves not as a religious system, but as a group of people on a shared journey; people on a path with ethical, spiritual and behavioural implications.

So here we have the confluence of several ideas. One of them is represented in the Fra Angelico/Filippo Lippi painting: the whole human community (from oriental potentates to leprous beggars and everyone in between) joins in praise of the one born in Bethlehem. The second involves our talk of ways, roads, paths and journeys. The whole world is drawn to this human manifestation of what God is up to, at Epiphany. And they all respond to this manifestation with a pilgrimage. Taken together, these ideas remind us that Christianity is a Way; it is a way of being and acting, vis-à-vis the world, others and God.

As I think about *The Adoration of the Magi* in the National Gallery and what it represents; as I think about the Letter to the Ephesians and Paul’s declaration that we are in the middle of a great divine mystery which is working itself out; and as I think about those Magi making their way from the East to Bethlehem, and surrounded at the stable by the fullness of the human community; I believe that something big, universal and hopeful is going on here.

God is bringing together all categories of people, people who would not normally be associated with one another. And in bringing people together beyond categories, God is destroying the idea of all human categories, for ever. To say that we are all ‘one in Christ’ is neither a sentimental aspiration, nor is it triumphant arrogance. To say that we are all ‘one in Christ’ transcends all ideas of race, ethnicity, gender and social standing.

All of us – the Magi, the lepers, the Gentiles, the Jews, those who have followed Jesus from the earliest days, and those who have followed him for even the shortest of times – are on a journey.

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany. On this day when we proclaim and celebrate the manifestation of God's glory in Jesus, let us, like the Magi, commit ourselves to being his companions. The Way that our Lord walked is the way of hope and blessing and peace. If we are anxious, nervous or unsettled; if we feel uncertain about what the future holds; if we are eager for a more abundant life; then let us join the Magi, the disciples and our fellow Christians throughout the world, who are on the same journey.

As we walk that road with the Magi and with Christ, you and I can become wise people, too.

Amen.