

STEPPING BACK INTO DARKNESS

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.

Those of you who have travelled to the south of Wales in the United Kingdom will know that its landscape is both beautiful and ancient; and some of you might have visited an unusual spot called Brecon Beacons National Park. The Park, which was established in 1957, is centred on the Brecon Beacons range of hills but actually covers 519 square miles. Most of the national park is bare, grassy moorland grazed by Welsh mountain ponies and Welsh mountain sheep, with scattered forestry plantations and pasture in the valleys. It is known for its remote reservoirs, waterfalls and caves; but since February 2013, the park is also known as an International Dark Sky Reserve.

This means that when you visit the park, you can star gaze to your heart's content, because there is almost no light pollution whatsoever. And I truly mean star-gaze; in this park, you can see the kinds of skies that make you feel incredibly small and insignificant. At Brecon Beacons, for example, the great Milky Way fills the whole of your vision. This International Dark Sky Reserve is the opposite of London, or Munich, or Beijing or New York. To see the stars, you need to go to a really dark place.

And star-gazing is at the heart of our celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany today. We are told that the wise men followed a star. For them to see that star, they needed to be in a very dark place; but because they found such a dark place, they found God. Sometimes, to see God, we also need to move away from the lure of the lights of the

world and into God's dark place where, ironically, as Henry Vaughan beautifully suggests in his poem called 'The Night', we might find a 'dazzling darkness'.

The prophecy of Isaiah that we heard just a moment ago reminds us that in entering the darkness, we can find the glory of God: 'For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.'

The wise men watched the star rise in the East and they naturally assumed that the one who was born King of the Jews would be born in a royal city; and where else than in Jerusalem, with its huge ramparts, magnificent Temple complex and sumptuous royal palace? They found a King, all right (King Herod); they found fame, success and worldly power; but they also found corruption, abuse of that power and paranoia. In finding King Herod, the wise men also lost sight of the star; the prophecy, however, said that the Messiah would not be born in Jerusalem; and they therefore needed to leave that place, travel past the fields where the shepherds had watched the dark skies, and allow the star to lead them to the little town of Bethlehem.

Preaching at the Epiphany Mass last year in Rome, Pope Francis said this: 'An entirely different attitude reigned in the palace of Herod, a short distance from Bethlehem, where no one realised what was taking place. As the Magi made their way, Jerusalem slept. It slept in collusion with a Herod who, rather than seeking, also slept. He slept, anesthetised by a cauterised conscience.'

That chilling phrase – a 'cauterized conscience' – reminds us of what happens when power is abused and when human glory is placed before the reign of God. The second half of Matthew 2 (which we did not hear today) speaks of the massacre in and around Bethlehem of innocent children who were two years old or under; and

of the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. They, no doubt alongside others, were displaced from their home and became refugees and aliens in a foreign land. The Magi, aliens themselves, fell down on their knees and worshipped our Lord; while some of his own people sought control through an act of terror.

The word Epiphany means revelation. What is revealed? God's glory; and to whom is it revealed? To the whole world. Those three wise men, the first Gentile worshippers whom we know so little about in spite of ancient traditions and even assumed names, stand for all who search for God; and they also remind us of God's desire to draw all people to himself. As St Paul writes in our epistle reading today, 'Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.' And what is this gospel or good news? '...The boundless riches of Christ, ...to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.'

Leaving Jerusalem, the Magi stepped back into the darkness and discovered the glory of God shining through what the world sees as weak. When the wise men discovered Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem, they fell down and worshipped; and as they did so, Herod slept.

In his famous Nativity Sermon, St John Chrysostom said these beautiful words: 'The Son of God, who is the God of all things, is born a Man in body. He permits himself to be placed in a crib, (he) who holds the heavens in his hand. He, whom the world cannot contain; he is heard in the voice of a wailing infant, at whose voice in the hour of his passion the whole earth (will) tremble. The Magi, beholding a Child, profess that this is the Lord of Glory, the Lord of Majesty, whom Isaiah has shown was both Child and God, and King Eternal.'

This revelation to the Gentiles ushered in a new world order, the opposite of worldly corrupt power. This new world order heralded the sovereignty of God, who then began the process of creating a new people of God. Only this time, God chose *everyone* and broke down the barriers that divided us from him once and for all.

How poignant that the last of the treasures given to Christ is myrrh, which was used for burial rites. This new world order came at a cost, as Simeon prophesied; and Mary's heart was indeed broken as she stood at the foot of the Cross. Epiphany challenges us today to make choices (some of them perhaps costly) and to look diligently for our Lord and the breaking in of his Kingdom.

I think it is significant that the week after Christmas is marked in the Church's calendar by feast days that seem very much at odds with the joy of the birthday of Jesus: that of St Stephen, the first martyr of the Church; that of the Holy Innocents, victims of a despotic and cruel ruler; and that of St Thomas Becket of Canterbury, who struggled to balance the power of a king who was his friend and the need for the Church to remain faithful to the humble Christ.

Yet there is wisdom in celebrating what the world might see as 'weak' alongside the celebration of the birth of our Lord. The Magi worshipped Jesus; and then we hear nothing more of them. They returned to their own lands by another route. We who encounter Christ will also find our routes changed, too. Once we recognise God's presence in our lives, like the Magi all those years before, we will have to make choices as to which way we will go home. If our home is truly to be with God, that journey, (like that of Stephen, the Holy Innocents, Thomas and so many Christians in the world today) may come at a cost.

Amen.