

THE OTHER WISE MAN

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.

Our passage from St Matthew's gospel is very familiar to us. It's the story of the Wise Men who travelled from the East bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, the most precious of gifts to be offered to the Christ child. The story tells us that the Wise Men followed a most brilliant star that had appeared in the solar system. They knew that this star was the unusual astral phenomenon that would herald the glorious event of our Lord's birth. And so these Wise Men, traditionally called Magi or Kings, set about their journey, determined to pay homage to this new-born King who had come to save his people.

But the Wise Men, after presenting their gifts, went by a different route; and so the message of God's gift to the world went with them. The message was about God, who so loved the world that this gift of Jesus was offered; and whoever believed in this child Jesus would have eternal life. That's quite a story to tell. Thanks in part to the Wise Men, it's a story that has been told throughout the centuries; and it continues to be told.

Matthew, the gospel writer, used this story to remind the Jews that they indeed had a mission to the Gentiles. By the birth of our Lord and the early visitation of Wise Men from the East, God had been revealed *for the world to see*: not just the Jews, but non-Jews as well. This is the key message of Epiphany, a word which means 'revelation' or 'appearing' or 'manifestation'.

And since that first Epiphany, God continues to reveal himself to us each day. Sometimes we notice, and sometimes we don't. But this doesn't stop our God, who constantly reveals himself so that he can draw us into a relationship with him. To be in a relationship with us is more important to him than you and I can imagine.

As we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany today, I wonder how much you and I identify ourselves with the Wise Men? Tradition, which came later, informed us that there were just three of them; but in a sense the Wise Men represent all of humanity, every one of us who have embarked on a journey to find Jesus. Have all of us found him? And if we have, what gifts do we have to offer to him, who is God's supreme gift to the world? For those of us who are willing to make the journey to meet the Christ, God in his infinite wisdom gives each one of us a special gift to offer.

Nineteenth-century author Henry Van Dyke wrote a story called *The Other Wise Man*, which portrays a Wise Man called Arteban who heralded from the other side of the world, a kingdom that was even farther away than those of the other three.

Arteban, like the Wise Men in scripture, was made aware that the Kings of Kings would come down to earth and that he was the one who would bring light and peace to the world. And so Arteban set out to follow the star that would lead him to this new-born.

He chose three rare pearls which he had inherited from his ancestors as his gift for the infant. One was pink mother of pearl. The pearl's beautiful heart-shape harboured the beat of all that causes joys and sorrows in the world. Indeed, it was a live pearl that represented that which was closest to Arteban's heart: his emotions, his joys and sorrows, his hopes and his dreams.

The second pearl was green. In it could be found the reflection of all the natural things of creation: the sea and the earth, with its grasses and hillsides. In the giving of this green pearl, all of Arteban's possessions, including everything that he could admire, would be offered.

And the third pearl was white, but almost transparent. In it, one could see the right path to follow and the solutions to problems. In giving this white pearl, Arteban was offering his soul and all the goodness that he possessed to the Christ-child.

So holding tightly on to his treasure box, Arteban set out upon his journey. The journey was quite long, as he encountered unexpected delays; but he arrived at last to the country where the star stood still. He learned from the villagers that the wailing and moaning heard throughout the town was because of Herod's decree to kill all male children under the age of two. While Arteban was sitting in an inn, a woman dashed inside, clutching her child with Herod's henchmen in pursuit. Arteban asked the henchmen if he could trade the child's life for the pink pearl. After viewing this precious gem, Herod's men snatched the pearl and fled, realising that they would never again have an opportunity of a gift so rare.

Arteban continued on his journey, not quite understanding why the star could no longer be seen. He soon came upon soldiers taking away a thief. When he tried to intervene and bargain for the prisoner's life, the soldiers would hear none of it until the green pearl was presented. The soldiers quickly realised the value of such a pearl and handed the prisoner over to Arteban.

For a long time after this, Arteban continued to look for the King of Kings, carrying his one white pearl that was left. As he approached Jerusalem, the City of Peace, a young girl ran to him and fainted. Men were planning to stone her to death for refusing to marry the one chosen for her.

When Arteban held his last pearl before the men, they could not refuse such a gift. Lust for its beauty and value overcame their desire to pursue the girl any longer. Just as the last pearl was given up, Arteban heard a great commotion and noticed that a man was being taken outside the city to be crucified. When the man turned his face towards Arteban, he knew that this was the one that he had been looking for all this time. And look at what was happening to him.

At this point, Arteban had nothing to offer to the King of Kings or to his persecutors in exchange for the King's life. Arteban had given everything he had on the way. But as Arteban looked again at the King of Kings, he saw that the three pearls shone on the face of Jesus. In fact, they appeared to be richer and more vibrant than when Arteban had carried them in his treasure box. And then he heard the Son of God say to him, 'Go in peace. As for your gift, I truly did receive it.'

There are many gifts that you and I can bring to the Christ child. Thinking again of the pearls in the story, they can be our hopes and our dreams; they can be our earthly possessions; and yes, they can be our very soul.

This Epiphany, let us continue on our journey, as the Wise Men did; and let us continue to look for the revelation (or 'epiphany') of God in our daily lives. Each time we encounter our Lord, our hearts and lives will be changed. We will be different. And we will then be encouraged to continue on our way, proclaiming the love of God as manifested in Jesus the Christ, the Light of the world.

Amen.