

The Feast of the Epiphany 2016

Today my 19 year-old Godson, Lukas, is accompanying some of the younger members of his parish in Germany as they go door-to-door singing carols. Some of the youngsters are dressed up as kings bearing gifts, others as angels. One of the angels carries a long pole with a star hanging from it. These are the "Sternsingers" (Star Singers). At any house that welcomes them they sing a carol, receive a donation to the charity for which they are collecting (this year it is for a project in Latin America), and Lukas chalks on the lintel of the door of the house – 20 + C + M + B + 16. The numbers are, of course, the year that has just begun, the '+'s are crosses, while the letters represent the legendary names of the Three Magi – Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. However, the letters also stand for the Latin words, "Christus Mansionem Benedicat" ("May Christ Bless this House"). It is a very traditional religious practice in various Middle European countries going right to the heart of the wish for all Christians at the beginning of a New Year.

The visit of the Magi is the stuff of legend. Mysterious kings/magi/wise men coming from an even more magical and mysterious East, a romantic journey lasting for months, following a star, and coming to pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews. These are the first Gentiles, non-Jews, to whom the Saviour is revealed. Just that short Gospel-passage has inspired the human imagination to come up with carols, poems, and paintings, and many, many legends about who these people were and what happened to them after they left Bethlehem.

Both the human imagination, and that practice of asking God's blessing on our homes at the beginning of a New Year have much to teach us.

The Gospels invite us to use our imaginations, guided by our faith, to bring alive the stories which are so familiar to us, not just about the events surrounding Jesus' birth, but also the whole of his life-story. Becoming alive once again, these stories can nourish our faith, and help it to grow and develop, as it is meant to do. Beginning the New Year by asking Christ to bless our homes is part of this process, this journey of faith.

We do not have the custom in this country of physically visiting the homes of the parish and writing those symbols of blessing on our door-lintels, but we could take a moment or two some time in the next day or so to dedicate the New Year to the same thing, and to ask God's blessing on our families during 2016.

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At the heart of that story of the Visit of the Magi is an irony that is mirrored in St Matthew's Gospel as a whole: the people who were supposed to welcome the Messiah did not, but those to whom he was revealed from outside did welcome him. Herod was a Jew – a not very observant one and supremely evil in many of his savage actions towards anyone whom he perceived to be a threat – but a Jew nonetheless. The Magi were gentiles/pagans, not members of the "Chosen Race" and yet, just as in the rest of the Gospel, these are the people who would actually recognise and accept Jesus for who he really is: the Messiah for whom the Jewish people were supposed to be waiting. The same Messiah for whose death they would ultimately demand from Pontius Pilate on Good Friday.

In celebrating this feast we celebrate the first 'showing' – 'epiphany' – of Jesus to the non-Jewish world. It is kept as the main celebration of Christmas in many Orthodox Churches, and is still marked with great festivity in many countries across the globe. One of the traditions still common in Catholic parts of Germany is the visit to doorsteps of the "Stern Singers" (Star Singers). These are children, dressed up in royal regalia, who go around towns and villages knocking on doors, singing carols and collecting monies for charities. Whichever charity is designated that year by a diocese can be assured of a very significant donation from this occasion. The fundamental idea is of giving presents to the new-born king just as the Magi did themselves.

We are used to associating the three gifts mentioned in the Gospel with various aspects of who Jesus is: Gold, truly a king; Frankincense; a holy person; and myrrh, one who was to suffer. That is certainly one way of looking at them. Another would be to see the gifts representing the givers themselves: Magi, somewhat exotic, in our view, a cross between astronomers and astrologers and, as the name suggests, magicians of some kind. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were also items used by such people in their work. In other words, as well as recognising him for who he truly is, they are offering something of themselves to the new-born king.

Now all gifts, to a degree, express something of who we are to whom they are presented. Think for a moment, however, of what might have been the greatest, most meaningful gift you have ever received. It may have been money but just as easily it may not even have been of any monetary value at all. What actually counted was the fact that someone whom we love dearly gave something of their own selves.

Some of the most memorable gifts parents receive from young children are their artwork. Purporting to be a picture drawn of their house and family, their pet dog and so on, these gifts are of no monetary value whatsoever, but they can easily be the most treasured gifts a mother or a father has ever received. They are precious because they represent – in a sense they are part of – the little child who has given them. Nothing can possibly be a greater gift than the gift of oneself.

So, the question arises, both on the occasion of this feast and the fact that we are beginning a New Year, what gift might I be able to give in return for the great gift given to us of the Saviour? Perhaps that might be a focus for thoughts over the next few days.