

**Sermon**

Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2007

Lessons

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

Ephesians 3: 1 – 12

Matthew 2: 1 – 12

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, the strength of the souls that seek You; direct our thinking, and our speaking, and our hearing; that we may more fully know You, and more perfectly love You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**The star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came  
and stood over where the young child was....And when they  
were come into the house...they...fell down, and worshipped him**

*Matthew 2:9, 11*

In her novel, *A Map of the World*, Jane Hamilton sees a divide between how two people may understand God. She says:

For Theresa, God was something that was outside her, some unfathomable being who made the highway radiant. I thought in the harsh December wind that for me God was something within that allowed me, occasionally, to see.

For the author, Jane Hamilton, God was something that allowed her to see. Philip Toynbee says that “The basic command of religion is not ‘Do this!’ or ‘Do not do that!’ but simply, ‘Look!’.” Today we celebrate Epiphany: the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, to the Gentiles. The Apostle Paul’s ministry was among the Gentiles, non-Jews. In his Letter to the Ephesians he says that in the past humankind was not told this great secret, which God now reveals to His ‘holy apostles and prophets.’ The secret is that the Gentiles have a part with the Jews in God’s blessing: they are to be fellow-heirs. St Paul wrote:

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

I love the story of the wise men, the Magi, for it contains within it a basic and inescapable fact concerning faith. Though Jesus is Immanuel, though Christ be born

in a stable, though Paul took the gospel into villages, towns and cities throughout the Roman Empire, still we must ourselves set out on a journey. The Magi travel to see for themselves the Christ-Child:

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.

Faith is always a pilgrimage, a journey, a setting out in search of the God whom we know comes to us. Jane Hamilton said that God was something that allowed her to see. Philip Toynbee said that the basic command of religion is to look. The Christian message is clear: the hearts of men and women are made great enough to contain God Himself, souls have been made that they can be possessed and saturated by God's Spirit, but we must ourselves go to the stable, we must ourselves in our lifetime seek the Holy One.

There is a famous passage from the writing of Bede, the eighth century English monk, in which one of the counsellors of King Edwin of Northumbria makes a comparison between the life of a person and the fleeting passage of a sparrow through a firelit banqueting hall in winter. To the King, the counsellor says:

Inside all is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging: the sparrow enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears for a moment, what follows or indeed what went before we know nothing of at all. If this new doctrine of Christ [that we hear of] brings us more information, it seems right that we should embrace it.

Our conviction, not mere opinion, our conviction is that God acted decisively in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and that Christ is the central point, the central orb

of the universe, of history and all creation. The story of Jesus brings more than 'more information' to our self-understanding. He is the Light to the Gentiles, the Word made flesh and the Saviour of humankind. Not for nothing does H G Wells say of Christ:

His is easily the dominant figure in history....A historian without any theological bias whatever should find that he simply cannot portray the progress of humanity without giving a foremost place to a penniless teacher from Nazareth.

Jesus is the Light to the Gentiles, He is God with us, Immanuel, but we must each of us, on each new day and in each new year that we are given, make our own way to the stable, to the Holy One.

The journey undertaken by the Magi will have been a testing one, one that promised great reward but also hardship. Monks enter a monastery not to escape the trials and temptations of this life. The best of them know that the trials and temptations lie in the human heart and the monastery is a place where human frailties and weakness can be confronted using prayer and the study of Scripture as their principal weapons. Few of us are called to the monastic life, but all of us can seek the Christ-Child while facing life's trials and temptations.

Dr Sheila Cassidy is perhaps best known as the young doctor imprisoned and tortured for treating a wounded revolutionary in Pinochet's Chile. Dr Cassidy was arrested on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1974. She was sitting in a friend's home when gunshots were heard. She, together with the priest who was also there, ran out to see what was happening. The maid had been shot in the back. Cassidy was arrested. She had never been politically active. Her crime was to treat a wounded man. During her journey in

the car she was blindfolded and subject to gratuitous violence. When she arrived at her destination, she was degraded and tortured. She was given electric shocks, some severe. She spent three days in that room. Cassidy was then transferred to another centre where she spent most of the month in solitary confinement. Her time in solitary confinement was a time of physical pain and fear but also a spiritual struggle. Her instinct, she said, was to pray, 'Lord! Help! Get me out of here!' Little by little, it occurred to her that there was a better way to pray. The prayer she learned as a child repeated:

Grant that I may love you always – then do with me what you will.

Cassidy said that this act of abandonment to the will of God was 'an enormously powerful religious experience.' On retreat some months earlier she had drawn a picture of a cheque which read, 'Payable to God, one life' and signed it, 'Sheila Cassidy.' She felt that God had taken her at her word, though she wanted to rip up the cheque. Abandonment to God is the journey we are all invited to embark upon. It is almost always through a desert, a hard place, a barren place. Cassidy quotes three lines of an anonymous poem:

Abandonment is not the act of a child...  
It is a letting go of the strings by which we manipulate our lives...  
It is the climatic moment of any man's life.

Recently, Sheila Cassidy said:

Looking back over the past thirty years, I believe that this [abandonment] was indeed for me a climatic moment, for however I may have strayed from the straight and narrow, since then, I have been possessed of a kind of peace about the future. I believe at a very deep level that God has [His] world in hand and that, as Julian of Norwich said so long ago, 'All things shall be well; all things shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'

Not for a moment does Cassidy equate trust in God, abandonment to God, with a naïve belief that God will protect her from harm. In her lifetime, she had been

tortured, suffered ten years depression during the years she worked at a hospice and endured bilateral breast cancer. She said that God did not take away the despair of insomnia, the sadness of losing her breasts nor the mental scars from her solitary confinement, but still she believes God to have been with her, sharing her experiences: all things shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

The wise men made their way to the house where the child was. They saw him and fell down and worshipped Him. Is this not the abandonment of which Cassidy speaks? Is our spiritual journey not the same journey? Though the dangers and difficulties may vary from person to person, the trials and temptations of how we respond to the hardships we face and to God are the same for us all.

They drink all night, they drink all day:  
And the more they drink, the more they may.  
Such liking they have of that drink  
That none other wine they think.  
But only for to drink their fill  
And to have of this drink all their will.

Those who have tasted the sweetness of God give everything they have to obtain more of Him. The wise men threw their souls, their lives, their whole selves into seeking Christ, living for Christ. That is the example before us.

For our journey this year, later in the service, I shall invite you to stand while I make The Proclamation of the Date of Easter. This act of proclamation dates from a time when calendars were not readily available. It was necessary to know the date of Easter in advance because many of the other dates in the Christian calendar depend on it. Today, though the dates of Easter are known many years in advance, the Epiphany proclamation still has value. As we start out on a new year, the proclamation reminds

us of the centrality of the Resurrection of Jesus. Our life's experiences this year and our spiritual journey are made in the shadow of the Resurrection. Whatever the future holds for us, we may be comforted if we remind ourselves that God will be with us and that there is nothing, not even death, which can defeat us. We must look for Christ; that is the basic command of religion, and we do so knowing that the Risen Christ has already conquered death.

Amen.