

THE OPPOSITE OF CHRISTMAS:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Dr Richard Major
to the Anglican church in Zagreb
(meeting at St Joseph's Chapel, in the Jesuit seminary of the Immaculate Heart of Mary),
for the Solemnity of the Epiphany, 9th January, 2011.

© Richard Major 2011; repeating 02i10, which adapted 03i10
richard@richardmajor.com

4

Isaiah lx1-6; Psalm lxxxiv¹⁻⁸; Ephesians iii¹⁻¹²; Matthew ii¹⁻¹².
From the Gospel:



*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened,
and all Jerusalem with him.*

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost:
Amen.

The Holy Gospel

IN THE TIME OF KING HEROD, after JESUS was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: *And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.*"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the Child; and when you have found Him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay Him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the Child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they knelt down and paid Him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

OUR BUSINESS FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES is to try not to be drunk. I mean drunk on today's feast, drunk on the overpowering charm of the Feast of the Epiphany.

It's not easy to stay sober. Our heads are turned by the sheer romance of it all. I mean by the incense, the coffers of gold, the caskets of fragrant myrrh, by the evil glamour of Herod, by the intoxicating wandering glory of the star. We are giddy at the spectacle of those crowned philosophers travelling out of the depths of Asia with their retinues. Their white camels, caparisoned with tapestries! Their pageboys in golden turbans! The haughty soldiers in silk tabards! The three kings themselves, suave and wise, hung with ropes of pearls!

I admit that the phrases *caparisoned camel* and *jewelled turban* don't appear in our source. But we know from dozens of paintings and thousands of Christmas cards how exotic the Magi looked. We've just heard a reading about *the multitude of camels, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah*. The choir has sung of *the Kings of Tharsis and of the isles, the Kings of Arabia and Saba bringing gifts*. This is heady stuff.

However, no date is included in the Church's kalendar just because it's sensational and feeds our imagination. Every feast, every fast, preaches the Gospel to us. It tells us something we wouldn't hear if we didn't keep that feast or observe that fast.

For a few minutes, therefore, let's clear our heads and be sober. Today we are invited, not just to luxuriate in Epiphany, but to understand it.

The thing to grasp is this: Epiphany isn't just the twelfth day of Christmas. Christmas and Epiphany aren't the same. I know we often get them into a happy muddle. In our nativity scenes the shepherds of Christmas night and the three kings of Epiphany are jumbled together. But really Epiphany is almost an anti-Christmas, just as Christmas is the anti-Epiphany. The two feasts aren't in harmony: they make one of those fine, violent contrasts of which Christianity is so fond.

What is the main point of the Christmas stories? That God came to us in obscurity, in almost grotesque obscurity. We miss the point of Christmas is we don't see that.

Of course we all have a soft spot for the little town of Bethlehem. But but we need to grasp how scandalously remote Bethlehem would have sounded to the first readers of the Gospels (for whom Rome was the inevitable centre of the world). The

only significance of Bethlehem for them was that Bethlehem was utterly insignificant. It was as ridiculously farflung a village as any village in the Roman Empire could be.

Bethlehem! Let's picture the single most farflung spot in Croatia: a tiny village out in the wolds of Slavonia, with just a petrol station, a straggle of farmers' houses, and a tavern. But that's enough. Behind the tavern is a roomy sort of shed where tools are kept. And in that shed God entered the world, nine days ago, in squalor, at midnight, almost in solitude. A few workers from a local farm turned up: no one else. The desert stars blazed away over Slavonia as usual. If the angels sang, no local paper recorded the fact.

That's what it was like when God came to us. The Birth could not have been more out-of-the-way. The divine humility is so extreme that God choose to steal into the world, silently, secretly, unmarked. That is the point of the Christmas stories.

And what is the point of the Epiphany stories?

The exact opposite. When God appeared as Man there was a political earthquake. The three wise men from the East seem intoxicatingly charming to us. But they weren't charming at the time. They represented a public crisis. They appeared in the capital announcing 'The King is born. Where is He?' *When King Herod heard this*, our Gospel says, *he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him*. I should think they were frightened. Imagine the stir if, let us say, the King of Thailand, the President of Kenya and the Grand Duke of Luxemburg suddenly flew into Zagreb crying 'Where is the universal Emperor Who must humble every government?' – and then blew out again in the direction of Osijek. The stock market would plunge; the European Parliament would hold emergency sessions; President Obama would be briefed. Barack Obama is a delicate gentleman, and I'm sure he wouldn't deal with the threat by flying in the Marines and having the boy children of Slavonia eliminated *en masse* – which is what Herod did. He sent a party of his troops into Bethlehem, and the killings began.

Thus the Herodian régime was shaken, and indeed a few years later the Romans intervened, because of this and similar atrocities, and overthrew it.

That's what it was like when God came to us. The Baby was troubling capitals, provoking massacres, setting kingdoms by the ears, before He was a few weeks old.

So here we have our fine violent contrast. The Christmas feast carefully sets up a certain atmosphere: peace, awe, silent joy, solitude, secrecy. The feast of Epiphany comes along and knocks that atmosphere to pieces. The Greek word ἐπιφάνεια means a

public manifestation. Instead of silence and joy we have the collision of kingdoms, the turmoil of peoples, violence, intrigue: all the roar and lurid energy of human history.

And it's a fair question: if Christmas and Epiphany represent such opposite ideas, which is true? How does Christ show Himself to mankind? Does He steal to us gently, privately, silently? Or does He descend on us with the clamour of publicity?

It's a fair question, and the only fair answer is to say: both.

Both. Christ gives Himself to us quietly, again and again. You probably know that ravishing mediaeval carol:

*He came all so still where his mother was,
As dew in April that falleth on the grass.
He came all so still to his mother's bower,
As dew in April that falleth on the flower.*

That is how it was when Christ appeared in Bethlehem. That is how it is when you and I call Him, and He is with us. We say our prayers, we put out our hands for the Eucharist, and there, in unspeakable tenderness and privacy, God is with us. We are alone with Jesus, and the world does not know. Your faith is a hidden place which no visiting kings ever find. The silent night, holy night of Christmas is ours again and again, as long as we live.

But Christ's coming can not only be secret. If we think our faith is a private matter, then we haven't understood it.

In Christ, God and Man are united. With Christ, humanity starts moving back towards unfallen perfection and obedience. The divine Baby is necessarily the King of the universe, necessarily the Master of human affairs. That's why the Magi came to Him. They were not just three eccentric foreigners with a fine command of astronomy. Christians, who quite rightly never stop improving their stories, decided early on that the Magi were also princes: Balthasar, a young king from Africa; Melchior, a middle-aged king from Europe; and white-haired Caspar from the Orient. And they were philosophers: Chesterton has said that it may as well have been Pythagoras, Confucius and Plato who came to Bethlehem to prostrate themselves before the final truth. The Magi are representatives, representatives of all peoples, all nations, all continents, all culture. When they knelt before the Infant on His Mother's lap, they submitted the whole world to the God Who made it, and now lives in it.

That's why Epiphany was a public crisis. Where is he that is born King? for we are come to worship Him! cried the Magi; and Jerusalem trembled.

*

The Epiphany or showing-forth of Christ remains a public crisis. When parliaments debate tax or abortion: then the order and justice of Christ's kingdom struggle to be made themselves manifest in human affairs. When artists and film-makers libel the Christian Faith: that is Herod fighting back about the menace of the Prince of Peace. When the news of the Incarnation is proclaimed and pagans are converted, then that is Epiphany. And it is Epiphany an awful lot just now.

The Hebrews were a dispossessed nation tucked into a corner of the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, they had a unique knowledge of the one God, and cherished the hope that all nations would one day come to them, and submit to their God. We've heard that hope shouted out by Isaiah, six centuries before Christ: *The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising*. We've heard those fantastic images of camels, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah, processing into this tiny little secret nation. Nothing was less likely, you might say. Yet these visions came true. The kings of the world did hurry to the brightness of Christ's rising. Within a few centuries the whole Roman Empire had come and knelt before the Bethlehem Child, declaring Him to be God, acknowledging Him to be their only hope.

Two billion people bowed before the Child born at Bethlehem this Christmas, one in three of the entire human race. And our ranks grow quickly. In statistical terms we are unstoppable. In Church history there's never been anything like the early twenty-first century. Twenty three thousand people embraced the Christian Faith yesterday, 23,000 were converted today, 23,000 will arrive tomorrow, mainly Africans and Asians. Since last Epiphany eight and half million people, from nations we've scarcely heard of, have done exactly what the Magi did: they have come from far away, they have reached Christ and they have submitted.

And then there is the revival in the tired Church of the West. Even among us orthodoxy is being recovered (if only because the neutered versions of the Faith are finally gibbering themselves to sleep); splendour of worship is being restored after the plastic decades, the liturgy of incense and gold; bishops are confident in reproving apostate statesmen.

Epiphany is true. Christianity is always a public matter, even a political matter. Its aim is world conquest.



Christmas is true. Christ steals to you privately, quietly, still as dew in April, murmuring *I am with you; love Me more, follow Me more closely.*

But the same Christ Who woos you rules history. More than that: its the same universal Wisdom Who orders the movements of each electron, and sways the explosion of galaxies, and seeks to order the nuances of your particular life. The God within is the God without. And therefore the struggle for order within you and me is the same as the overt struggle of the Church.

We sometimes forget that. We sometimes evade it.

On the one hand, it's sometimes more interesting to gossip about, say, the troubles of the Anglican Communion, than to look inward, and attend to the business of Christ knocking on the door of my mind, saying *Don't do that, do this – now; be merciful, be brave.*

On the other hand, sometimes it's tempting to shut ourselves up with the Presence of Jesus and forget about the Church Militant, brawling her way through the world: the huge, bumbling, joyful, messy, triumphant Church of God.

Whenever I forget that how intimately the Faith makes demands on me, then it is time for another Christmas in my mind. The Christ Child lies sleeping in the quiet stable. It's time for me to steal back to Him, and kneel.

But whenever I forget that Christianity is a public matter, whenever I feel indifferent to the Church's blatant struggle in the world, whenever I find my faith turning precious, snobbish, solitary and aloof – well, then it is time for a new Epiphany. I am look at the newspapers and open my eyes.

The Holy War rages everywhere. We are soldiers in that war, with military obligations. The Christ Child manifests Himself and defies Herod; Herod is frightened, Herod is bloody; and amidst this uproar humanity – human learning, human culture, human authority – gravitates to Bethlehem, kneels down before the Lord of triumph, and swells His retinue.

To Him, therefore, the manifested Son,
with the Father and the Holy Ghost,
ever One God,
be glory and honour now: and in the ages of ages.
Amen.

© 2011 The Rev'd Dr Richard Major,
Nansough Manor, near Ladock, Cornwall TR2 4PB
24B Jurčkova cesta, Ljubljana, Slovenija
major@richardmajor.com

The two pictures are details of Gentile da Fabriano's altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Magi* (1423), stolen from the Church of the Trinity and now in the Uffizi, Florence

A FEW NOTES

1. The familiar Authorised Version says that *Herod was troubled*, and the NRSV translation, *frightened*, leaps out at us. I loyally follow the lectionary, but it seems to me that the Greek word *ταράσσω*, can't really be read *frightened*. The angel *ταράσσω* the waters of the pool of Bethesda (John v⁴); at the Last Supper Christ says *Now is My Soul ταράσσω* (John xii²⁷), and He appears *ταράσσω* when Martha meets Him weeping for Lazarus (John xi³³). *Frightened* makes no sense in these passages, and distorts today's Gospel. The moral is that the musty old English Bible is generally right, as well as beautiful, dignified and fundamental. Don't trust modern substitutes.

(More Greek carry-on at <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G5015&t=KJV>).

2. "Like me", says Evelyn Waugh's St Helena, communing with the Magi, "you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way... How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by what outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts! You came at length to the final stage of your pilgrimage and the great star stood still above you. What did you do? You stopped to call on King Herod. Deadly exchange of compliments in which began that unended war of mobs and magistrates against the innocent!" (*Helena*, 1954.)

3. The Church isn't committed to the historicity of the Christmas stories, but it's worth noting that Macrobius, a sound pagan, has heard a scrambled account of the Massacre (*Saturnalia*, II, iv¹¹): *Cum audisset inter pueros quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimum iussit interfici filium quoque eius occisum, ait: Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium*. When [Augustus] heard that among the boys in Syria under two years old whom Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered to kill, his own son was also killed, he said: it is better to be Herod's pig [since Herod ostentatiously kept *kosher*], than his son.

4. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (1925), II, i: [The Magi] would stand for the same human ideal if their names had really been Confucius or Pythagoras or Plato. They were those who sought not tales but the truth of things, and since their thirst for truth was itself a thirst for God, they also have had their reward. But even in order to understand that reward, we must understand that for philosophy as much as mythology, that reward was the completion of the incomplete.

Such learned men would doubtless have come, as these learned men did come, to find themselves confirmed in much that was true in their own traditions and right in their own reasoning. Confucius would have found a new foundation for the family in the very reversal of the Holy Family; Buddha would have looked upon a new renunciation, of stars rather than jewels and divinity than royalty. These learned men would still have the right to say, or rather a new right to say, that there was truth in their old teaching. But after all these learned men would have come to learn. They would have come to complete their conceptions with something they had not yet conceived; even to balance their imperfect universe with something they might once have contradicted. Buddha would have come from his impersonal paradise to worship a person. Confucius would have come from his temples of ancestor-worship to worship a child....

Here it is the important point that the Magi, who stand for mysticism and philosophy, are truly conceived as seeking something new and even as finding something unexpected. That tense sense of crisis which still tingles in the Christmas story and even in every Christmas celebration, accentuates the idea of a search and a discovery. The discovery is, in this case, truly a scientific discovery. For the other mystical figures in the miracle play; for the angel and the mother, the shepherds and the soldiers of Herod, there may be aspects both simpler and more supernatural, more elemental or more emotional. But the wise Men must be seeking wisdom, and for them there must be a light also in the intellect. And this is the light; that the Catholic creed is catholic and that nothing else is catholic. The philosophy of the Church is universal. The philosophy of the philosophers was not universal. Had Plato and Pythagoras and Aristotle stood for an instant in the light that came out of that little cave, they would have known that their own light was not universal. It is far from certain, indeed, that they did not know it already. Philosophy also, like mythology, had very much the air of a search. It is the realisation of this truth that gives its traditional majesty and mystery to the figures of the Three Kings; the discovery that religion is broader than philosophy and that this is the broadest of religions