



Feast of the Epiphany Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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At this time of the year most Catholic churches, including our Cathedral, set aside a special place where a Christmas crib can be created. Usually this happens at least a few days, if not longer, before Christmas Day. The shepherds are usually there with their sheep, there are often a few cows as well, and Mary and Joseph are there, gathered around the empty manger, waiting for the statue of the infant Jesus to be put in place at Mass on Christmas Eve. While there is often a star placed above the crib, the wise men are absent because they are still on their journey from the East, having seen a bright and unexpected star in the sky which they interpret as a sign that a new king has been born.

The wise men set out on their journey, eventually arrive in Jerusalem and from there travel on to Bethlehem, where they discover this new king lying in the most unexpected place, a humble manger in a possibly quite run-down stable. Although this could not have been what they were expecting to find when they first set out on their journey, they nevertheless recognise in this child a precious gift from God and they offer the child and his parents, in return, their own gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. God's gifts often come to us in ways we do not expect!

The wise men are not the only people in the Gospel story who have to undertake a challenging and hazardous journey to discover just what God is offering them and asking of them. Mary and Joseph had to leave their home and travel to Bethlehem in order for their child to be born. Immediately after the visit of the wise men, Mary and Joseph, who had been alerted to danger in a dream, had to set out on another difficult journey as they fled into Egypt to escape the treachery and cruelty of King Herod. Mary herself, when she first heard that she was to be the mother of the messiah, had to undertake a journey, not physical this time but spiritual, as she moved from fear at the appearance of the angel, through confusion and uncertainty, to trusting faith in God. Her "yes" to God's invitation to be the mother of the messiah was free and whole-hearted, but it was not easy or without struggle. And Jesus himself, at least as some of the gospels present it, undertook a long, difficult and dangerous journey from the shores of the River Jordan where he was baptized by John the Baptist to Jerusalem, the place of his suffering and death – but also the place of his glorification.

Each of these journeys can help us to understand our own lives as a journey and to see, in each particular case, the ways in which God accompanies his people on their journey through life. I have often encouraged our priests and seminarians to reflect on their own journey, to tell their own story to themselves, in order to see, looking back, what they might not have been able to see so clearly at the time: namely that God was always with them, not always easy to recognise, leading them forward and gradually unfolding for them just what He, God, was asking of them.



This morning, as we reflect on the journey of the wise men, I want to encourage you all to do the same. In doing so, one question you might ask yourself is this: how is it that I come to find myself here in the Cathedral today? How is it that in ways which do not seem to be true for so many others, I have been given the gift of faith and been able to respond to it? Who have been the people and the events in my life which have been like the star the wise men saw rising in the east, helping me to see that there was something to which I was being called? And how did I find the courage, or the wisdom, to follow those stars, those lights, which have led me, and continue to lead me, to God?

In a way reflecting on these questions unites us with Mary, the Lord's mother, who we are told on a number of occasions in St Luke's gospel, treasured all that was happening to her and around her, pondering it all in her heart. It also unites us with the wise men who found their way to Bethlehem, and the child who was the very presence of God among us, because they paid attention to the signs God gave them, kept their eyes fixed on the star, and remained faithful to the journey.

We live in a beautiful city, and in a peaceful and richly-blessed country, but we also live in a society which does not always make it easy for us to keep our eyes fixed on the stars, the lights, God gives us to show us the way to him. We can easily be dazzled or distracted by so many other bright lights. Mary and Joseph did not allow their own difficult circumstances to overwhelm them and threaten their faith in God. The wise men did not allow the deceit and cunning of King Herod to compromise the integrity of their journey. Jesus himself never allowed the resentment, aggression and hard-heartedness of his opponents to deflect him from his mission and from his unyielding commitment to his heavenly Father. The gospels tell us that Jesus often spent long nights in prayer. The wise men from the East kept their eyes on the star which was guiding them forward. Joseph was open to the strange ways in which God spoke to him in dreams. And Mary, our model in faith, treasured all that took place in her life and pondered it all in her heart in silent prayer and reflection.

In our own journey through life, especially today when it is so easy to lose sight of God or push God to the margins of our life, we will need to keep searching for the star that can lead us to our final destination, to the place where we, like the wise men, will discover the face of God. That light, that star, might well become dimmed as so many other lights try to claim our attention but if like Mary we know how to ponder over and treasure all the ways in which God is present to us, we too will find our way to the place where Jesus is to be found. We will be able to offer him all the gifts which he in fact has given to us in the first place. Our hearts, like those of the wise men, will be filled with delight and we will create in our lives, as Mary and Joseph and the wise men did, that place which rightfully belongs to the God to whom we owe all that we are and all that we have.