

It's an enigmatic festival, Epiphany, enigmatic and mysterious. What was it about the star that induced the Wise Men to pack their bags and set out on a journey with no discernable end? And how did they come to offer their precious gifts to an apparently insignificant baby as though he was some great King? And after all that, then be content to disappear from the gospel story as mysteriously as they had entered it?

At one level, it's clear enough. In St Luke's gospel, it's the poor who see Jesus first. Mary, Joseph and a few shepherds from the hills. For St Matthew, though, it's Magi, representatives of the wider gentile world, who bring their gifts. They offer symbols of their wisdom and their wealth at the cradle of the King of the Jews. Matthew begins his Gospel with themes that will resonate throughout the story of Jesus and will come to a climax with his dying and rising. From the start he confronts us with ultimate questions. Where does power truly reside? Where is wisdom truly found? And where do we go to discover our true worth?

In the last resort it's about worship. As David Foster Wallace puts it: "Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." We are all made to give ourselves away to somebody or something. And who or what we worship tends to form us, helps to make us the people we are becoming. So if you worship money and things, you will tend to become greedy. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly and unsatisfied. Worship power and you will always be looking to control or manipulate the people around you for fear that they will be out to do you down. Worship intellectual cleverness and you will tend to become arrogant and live in continual fear of looking stupid.

So who or what am I worshipping?

The Wise Men went to a great deal of trouble to answer that question. They risked everything, setting out from their homeland to follow a star to wherever it would take them. They were patient and determined. And they were spiritually perceptive. They came to see that the true fulfilment of their quest was a mother and her baby. Here,

finally, was God's revelation, and so they knelt down and offered their gifts and their worship.

Epiphany is about our response to God's manifestation of himself to the whole world. So here are a couple of thoughts about our own worshipping.

The first is that our picture of the God we worship is always changing. We can never know God as he truly is, so as our faith grows, so our picture of God will change too. The author Gerard Hughes writes well about this in his book "The God of Surprises". He describes how he grew up with a picture God who he realized later was actually a monster, always demanding, always making him feel guilty. He suggests that many of us are unconsciously living with images of God a bit like this, and need to work to make our picture of God more and more like the one that Jesus reveals in the Gospels. In other words like a father or a mother who love their child unconditionally, who are always ready to forgive, to celebrate, to encourage, to heal. That, says Jesus, is how God really is, and that is the God we are invited to respond to in gratitude and joy. For Christians, God is Christ-like.

And what do we see when we see Jesus? We see one whose idea of power is to let go of power and become a child, vulnerable and dependent. This is the one that the Wise Men chose to offer their gifts to, rather than to Herod, the symbol of power that is about status and control and domination. No wonder they chose to return home by another way to avoid him. They had worshipped at a very different shrine.

St Paul puts it well: "The foolishness of God is wiser than men's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than men's strength." The God we worship challenges our human priorities. He wants us to recognize that those things that we think of as weaknesses, are potentially our strengths. Paul himself discovered this when he prayed to be relieved of his so-called "thorn in the flesh", possibly a form of epilepsy. But he tells us that he received the answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". That is an insight that is at the heart of our understanding of God, because it derives from the Cross.

Therefore he who shows us God

helpless hangs upon the tree;
and the nails and crown of thorns
tell of what God's love must be.

The mystery and the majesty of the power of God to work through weakness and suffering and death to bring new life and hope and renewal calls forth our worship and thankfulness. It's a story that begins with the baby worshipped by the Wise Men, and ends at Gethsemane and the Garden of the Resurrection.

So our picture of the God we worship needs to grow ever closer to the reality that the gospels reveal. And then, secondly, our worship needs to be an offering that is made for the world as a whole. This is important. Just as the Wise Men brought the best they could offer on behalf of the gentile world, so today when we worship we need to bring our best to God on behalf of our own society.

We are twenty-first century Christians, participating in today's world with all its particular plusses and minuses. When we worship we come as representatives of our world, offering the gifts that our world has to bring – all of it, the best and the worst, the tensions and difficulties, the joys and the successes. That's what we are bringing with us every Sunday. We come, in other words, not just for ourselves, but for the sake of the whole world for which Christ died. That is why we need to come. And we come together. Worship is a corporate act. We come as members of the Church, the community of faith that God has called into being. We are members one of another, not particularly gifted or talented maybe, but nevertheless here by the grace of God and given to one another here to worship and offer and receive on behalf of the world that God loves so much that he came himself in Jesus to live and die for us. So be aware of the dignity and importance of your call, and the important role you have to fulfil as a worshipper. All of us here are like the Wise Men, coming together with our gifts to offer at the Cradle. Each one of us is needed if the offering is to be the best that can be made. Each one of us is that important.

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
star of the east, the horizon adorning,

guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.