

The Epiphany

“Nations will be drawn to your light, and kings to the dawning of your new day.” Isaiah 60, 3

“Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.”
Matthew 2, 1-12

***We three kings from Orient are,
Bearing gifts we traverse afar...
O, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.***

John Henry Hopkins



The feast of Epiphany puts the focus on those three mysterious astrologers from the east around whom all kinds of stories and legends have been woven. The shapers of those stories have fixed the number of these mysterious figures at three, and given them the exotic names of Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. Matthew offers none of this detail. It is all the stuff of legend.

The readings for today's liturgy focus on the theme of light. Guided by the light of the star, these visitors to Bethlehem encountered the Light of the World in the person of Jesus and from there went out to take that light to, and be that light for, others. They became Christ-bearers (Christophers) to the nations. They came out of darkness (the non-Jewish, non-enlightened world), discovered the Light, and, transformed by the experience, went back to let their light shine for others.

We can all point to people who, like the Magi, have been touched by Jesus and who have been moved to share their experience. In the process they have inspired us to imitate them in some small way. We're all familiar with the actions of Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, two British athletes who won gold medals in the 1924 Paris Olympics. Their stories are celebrated in the film, *Chariots of Fire*. The Scotsman, Liddell, who had ambitions to follow in his parents' footsteps as a missionary to China, had represented Scotland in Rugby Union and was favourite for the 100 metres sprint in Paris. However, when he discovered that the heats were to be run on a Sunday, he withdrew from the event because of his religious convictions. Instead, he began to train for the 400 metres in which he was regarded as a rank outsider. He was one of the first in the history of the event to run it as a sprint and ultimately prevailed. However, what attracted the attention of sports journalists around the globe was his preparedness to put his values and religious commitment ahead of all else. Abrahams, on the other hand, had been the victim of anti-semitic slurs and prejudice. He used his place in the Olympic spotlight to draw attention to the anti-Jewish sentiment that was prevalent in England and in other nations that belonged to the Olympic movement. Liddell did go on to work in China as a representative of the London Missionary Society. Abrahams pursued a career in sports journalism and converted to Catholicism in 1934.

Closer to home, many of us would be conscious of Will Hopoate, a member of the 2011 premiership-winning Manly Rugby League team. Will, a committed Mormon, has swapped a lucrative rugby league contract for a pushbike and a Bible, as he sets out to be a door-knocking evangelist.

One who has grasped the real meaning of Epiphany is the poet, T.S. Eliot. He shares it with us in his poem, *The Journey of the Magi* which I have reproduced in full:

The Journey of the Magi

"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."
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires gong out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty, and charging high prices.:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot

The poem is a monologue that reveals the ponderings of one of Matthew's astrologers had followed the star to Bethlehem. Partly transformed by the experience, he has come to believe in the Incarnation - God become human in the person of the child Jesus. Yet, like us, he remains firmly part of that life that Jesus came to fully transform. Though he believes in Jesus he can't break free from his past. He feels oppressed by a sense of "death in life" and shares that he is prepared to submit to another death in order to find final deliverance from a world of old desires and gods, a world of "silken girls bringing sherbet". *Paradoxically, the Birth of Jesus also signifies a death to old ways. While that birth brings him hope for a new life, it also reveals to him the hopelessness of his previous life. He has seen this "strange Epiphany", but cannot grasp its full splendour and all its implications. He sees, but does not fully understand. He accepts the fact of birth, but is puzzled by its similarity to death.

And his experience is ours. We somehow understand the Epiphany - the manifestation of God in human form - but yet still fail to allow it to transform our living. We rejoice in the birth of the Christ child, but are puzzled by its similarity to death. Yet our experience tells us that every birth is a death to something else. The Epiphany is an invitation to let ourselves be transformed by God become human in the person of Jesus. Accepting the invitation has life-shaking implications.

Footnote: **Eliot intensifies the paradox with imagery that is evocative of the death of Jesus thirty-three years later. Note the images evocative of the Crucifixion - "three trees on the low sky" and "six hands...dicing for pieces of silver."*