

MANIFESTATION AND MYSTERY

Herod the great is the puppet king – the representative in Palestine of Rome. He oversaw a series of assassinations against opposition; he has informers and secret police everywhere; he has killed three of his sons and one of his wives. When he gets wind of Jesus' coming he is troubled and 'all Jerusalem with him'. He immediately hatches another scheme. Will the magi be taken in?

Who were they? They were Gentiles, perhaps of the Mesopotamian priestly class who, originating among the 6th century Medes known by Daniel, attended the royal court to serve as seers and interpreters of dreams. They were a leisure class with time to study the sky. They observe among the stars a very bright one. They head west and south.

The gospels only tell us that they gave, what was then, standard gifts to the one deemed to be king. Gold was valuable and symbolized virtue. Frankincense comes from tree gum resin and gives a sweet scent when it is warmed; when burned it keeps away pests – very useful for a newborn. Myrrh is also a sap from a tree and has healing properties as it seals off wounds. It was used as anointing oil, particularly for the deceased.

The wisdom of the wise men is that they worship the true king. Deep in their psyches, from whence dreams come, they discern Herod's lie and are presented with a choice. To return home another way isn't really a problem – they are foreigners and guests. They travel with permission, their visas stamped with Herod's mark. But to go against the king, who is not above murder, is to risk his fury. But they leave and by their act of disobedience the child is protected. In a sense, after Christ Mass, we can't traverse the same way again. From now on we will travel a more enlightened way home to God.

'Epiphany'? It's a moment of sudden great realization - we can all experience this in life. Epiphany is about revelation, the kind of sudden brightness that lights up the landscape of the mind. In this holy season we prepare for Jesus' coming; during Christmas we celebrate Jesus' arrival and at Epiphany we are invited to discover who Jesus is and why he came.

I believe that Jesus was the human face of God and that he came to show us the way to live and die.

This season begins and ends in light. From the heavenly star to the warm radiance of a newborn baby, these illuminations reveal the light that summons and sends. It is a light for all. The welcome mat is always out. The front porch light is left on to welcome newcomers – local fishermen, city priests, Roman soldiers and Greek tourists. From now on we'll welcome visitors, no matter their appearance; we'll encourage local councilors; we'll accept those from other faith communities; and we'll love without agendas and be known for our inclusion.

There can be no limits to love born at Christmas.

Another epiphany takes place at the baptism of Jesus. This disclosure from God occurs in a muddy river churned by the bodies of stressed and needy men and women who are searching. Jesus identifies totally with them as his cousin John says, 'I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite God's kingdom life like a fire. The Holy Spirit within you will change you from the inside out. He'll place everything that is true in its proper place before God.'

After the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying - here is prayer and in response to Jesus' prayer - the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit was evident, like a descending dove which came upon Jesus. Along with the Spirit came God's voice, 'You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love. You are the apple of my eye.'

Extraordinary – can we see it?

Out of the ordinariness of every day life, Jesus, the son of a peasant labourer comes to be baptized. Luke claims that he encountered the living God and that this was a turning point for Jesus. He's no longer just a country bumpkin but one whom God loves dearly and God tells Jesus that he is worthy of love. These two realisations herald the beginning of Jesus ministry – God loves him and he is worthy to be loved. That's transformational! To God, we are all beloved children – both a mystery and a fact... a manifestation in the act of baptism, available today for young and old.

We can all ask God for an epiphany at the beginning of this New Year. It will surely come, as Habakkuk says (Hab.2:3) 'For the vision is yet for an appointed time... though it tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come.'
May this be so for his name's sake. AMEN

