

Homily The Epiphany 2024

I just love the poem “The Journey of The Magi” by TS Elliott. It describes the harsh reality of the kings’ search for the newly born King and his family in the stable at Bethlehem. (See below for poem) I enjoyed Christmas with my family, and I suppose like so many others it was a time of coming together. Many, as The Magi, travelling great distances to be with loved ones. Yet family life can be for most a mixture of happiness and sadness, successes and failures, joys and disappointments ‘fallings out’ and hopefully, reconciliations. We can even despair sometimes and feel there is little scope of hope for our families.

Yet there is cause for great optimism in Holy Scripture, despite the imperfections we face in family life. Whose family might we be talking about when I say its members included individuals involved in witchcraft, idolatry, prostitution, adultery, murder, betrayal, disloyalty and deception etc? Jesus’ genealogy is reported in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and Matthew’s account (Mt 1:1-25), The Gospel of The Christmas Vigil Mass, has its heroes of the faith but also lists wicked men and women, like Manasseh (who promoted idolatry to Baal and practices of magic and divination), Raab, a prostitute from Jericho, King David, murderer of Uriah, with whose wife he committed adultery and Kings Solomon, Rehoboam and Abijah, who sinned out of idolatry.

In a sense the Birth of Jesus was the culmination of a sequence of tainted lives (as writer Fabrice Hadjadj rightly noted in *La profondeur des sexes: Pour une mystique de la chair*). The immaculate Conception of Mary, the Incarnation and the birth of Jesus Christ redeem a family tree that is sometimes illuminated by virtue but so many times muddled by sin. He can, without doubt, do the same for our often flawed families.

Holy Scripture certainly offers hope that it is possible for our families, despite our many shortcomings, to achieve holiness. In all the messiness of life Jesus is still there in our midst with love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness and understanding. We must never lose faith in God nor distance ourselves from family members in the face of the dramas that affect our homes and relatives: divorces, betrayals, disloyalty, fraud and so many other seemingly, hopeless situations. Let’s keep going because whoever perseveres with faith and lives in hope will see the Child God truly brought to birth in their lives and into the sometimes, chequered lives of our families.

The Magi never gave up in their quest to find, despite the hardships and disappointments of their journey (‘A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year’ TS Elliott “The Journey of The Magi”) that tiny babe who would transform not only their lives but the direction of the whole of human history.

The Journey of The Magi (TS Elliott)

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 going 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 arriving 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.