

Epiphany Procession Address 2012

This service has been well described a ‘a journey of faith’. That’s why we have heard about the shepherds who left their flocks to travel to Bethlehem, and became the first visitors to see the newly-born Jesus; and the wise men (tradition has made them into kings) who went on a hazardous journey from a far country to offer their gifts to Jesus, the new-born King.

It’s no accident that, from the earliest days of the Church, Christianity came to be known as ‘**The Way**’. Why? Because the Christian life is both a **journey** and a **way of living**.

I expect that, like me, you have received lots of letters at Christmas – the sort of circulars that tell of the ups and downs of family life in the past year. They can be entertaining, exasperating and sometimes moving. In just one such letter, I learned that a disabled son had achieved a place at university; that auntie had dropped her keys down...well, I don’t need to spell that out here; and that the goldfish had had to go to the vet with indigestion.

But just occasionally we can be brought up short by such letters, like this one, which gave an extraordinary account of the death of a grandfather, and the reaction among his family and friends:

‘So many people felt that Alf connected his life’s story to God’s story; that he had lived his life as God intended it to be, modeled on Jesus’ own life in the Gospels. One guest at the funeral was bemoaning the fact that Bob had never been ordained, but I think that misses the point. His deep commitment and conviction, his life of self-offering spoke to us all much more powerfully because he was a lay-person, doing an ordinary job and mixing with people out in the world, so many of whom were at the funeral. The way he lived, laughed and loved showed us the way, and we saw that it was Christ’s way.’

What an extraordinary epitaph, from a most unlikely source.

It reminds us that ‘the way’ for a Christian – to quote a modern hymn – should be ‘**to make our life a daily offering**’. This is not about money and possessions alone, though it has been well said that **you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving**. The shepherds, after all, did not have much to

offer in the way of wealth; but we read that they made known all that they had heard and seen: they went out and shared the good news of Christ's birth.

And the wise men? Well, of course, they were fortunate enough to be able to bring presents, but they were gifts which help us to understand the meaning and importance of that new birth: **Gold**, because Jesus was a King – the King of a new kind of kingdom; **Frankincense**, because Jesus was God's own Son, and incense is what we use to give God honour in worship; and **Myrrh**, the spice that is associated with burial, and tells us that Jesus would have to die to prove the extent of God's love.

In a moment, the choir will sing the carol *In the bleak midwinter* to the tune by Gustav Holst, who loved this Cathedral and is buried here. The last verse is a prayer, in the form of a question:

'What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.'

I came across a slightly different version of those words – I think it may be the original – which has helped me to think a bit more deeply, because I'm not very poor, in a material sense, and I need help to 'do my part' a lot of the time: so what must I do? These were the words I found:

'What can I give him, **empty as I am**?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, **I would know my part;**
What then can I give him? I must give my heart.'

'The way he lived, loved and laughed showed us the way, and we saw that it was Christ's way...'

As we journey to the manger, may we offer *our* gifts, which may be most rare; and then, when we return to our daily lives - when we go on *our* way - may we not be afraid to tell '**all that we have heard and seen.**'