

Epiphany

St Mary's, Jan 2nd 10 am

In the catacombs in Rome, dating from the end of the third century there is a tiny drawing of the three magi, dancing along, cloaks flying like three fairies. It was the beginning of one of the greatest artistic developments of all time. By the fifth century a mosaic in Ravenna shows the magi in rich and resplendent clothes. It was not long before they were thought of as Kings, with a long retinue winding through the hills to worship the Christ child, and in the course of time, one was depicted as old, one as middle aged and one young, and one black, indicating every race on earth. What this rich development wanted to bring out was precisely what the story in the Gospel wanted to convey, Christ is for all people, everywhere. So it was that Christianity spread round the globe. In 1910 there was a great conference of Christian churches in Edinburgh with the confident slogan "Christ for the world in this generation".

How different the scene looks now. Only about half the people in this country say they have a religion, and only a very small percentage of young people, many of them being Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Most of the those we pass day by day in Barnes are decent enough people, living comfortably and who appear to be totally indifferent to religion. How are we to respond to this challenge of our own times? We are not called to die for our faith, as were the first Christians, or to be imprisoned for it, as Christians are in so many countries of the world today. But we are called to live faithfully in a highly secular, sceptical society. As the gay novelist Michael Arditti put it "It is easier today to come out as gay than as a Christian."

First, I would suggest, simply hold fast to the truth and beauty of the Christian story. Life is not just an explosion of meaningless, competing energies; it is not a tale of sound and fury signifying nothing. We are here with a purpose. We are here to grow-to grow not just physically but spiritually. Physically, like all nature we grow, decay and die, but spiritually we are called to grow and more and

more. More particularly, we have been created in the image of God and are called to grow into his likeness. We are made in his image, that is we can think and choose and love and pray. We are called to grow into his likeness, that is, in an ever more sincere and real love of God and others; and this is not only to reflect his likeness, but to share his nature. What an amazing thought, to share the very nature of God.

It is this which lies behind our joyous celebration of Christmas and Epiphany. For as the early Christian thinkers put it. If we are to share the divine nature, it is only God himself who can impart that nature. And if it is humans who are to share it, then God himself must share our human nature too. For us humans to share in the divine nature, God must be fully divine and truly human. This is the amazing claim behind the Christian story This was succinctly stated by the fathers of the church, reflected in the Christmas collect, when they said “He came to share our human nature that we might share his divine nature.”

We are here to grow into the divine likeness, that is, to grow in the love of God for his own sake, and the love of others for their own sake. But as we know this process gets blocked. We suffer from arrested development. Instead of growing out of the self-interest which is essential to our survival, into an embrace of the interest of others, we get stuck. We struggle to transcend that innate egoism. So Christ came not just to share our nature, but to share our flawed nature in order to remove all that blocks and prevents our growth. In mystical union with him the springs of grace flow within us, uniting our lives with God now and forever.

For ever. How could a God of love have created us for his life only? How could a relationship with him, started now, end with death? Our tiny minds cannot imagine what lies beyond but as Paul put it

Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him.

I cannot imagine a more sublime view of life than that provided by the Christian faith. Let our imaginations take hold of it again, and

hold to it however inhospitable the cultural environment. Let it induce a new seriousness about our faith.

This week all over the world people have been remembering and giving thanks for the life of Desmond Tutu. Who could fail to be attracted by a faith like his? Rooted in a deep spirituality, brave for the truth, whoever would be offended by it, implacable in the pursuit of justice, and no less for reconciliation, all with his infectious humour and huge laugh. He showed what is possible for us human beings, what being a Christian means. May his example continue to inspire us all.

Secondly we need to continue to pray for our children, grandchildren, and their friends, not many of whom will have a faith. We cannot convert them. Only God can touch a person's heart and it is a great mystery as to how he seems to touch some people and not others. But through our prayers we can lift them into the presence of God praying that he would bless them and lead them and us deeper into his truth.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler he wrote a letter to someone about to be baptised. In it he said the church had lost the power to speak words of truth, because it had simply been fighting for its own preservation, so it would have to become silent, then he went on

but the day will come — when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. It will be in a new language, perhaps quite nonreligious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus's language, ...Until then the Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one, but there will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God's own time

There will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God's own time. May we be those people. At once truly joyous and serious about our faith