Of Itineraries and Inventories

1st Sunday after Epiphany

January 12th, 2019

It is the season of Epiphany, and today we read of how the Magi come to visit the Christ-child. Most of you know that this is one of my favourite stories—it combines astronomy, travel, the nativity, the adventure of a narrow escape. It is also a moment of perfect adoration and devotion, of revelation. For some, it is a children’s tale to be interpreted into oblivion, like many other stories. The Good Lord, however, has a habit of making history into children’s tales, whether we appreciate it or not, and the text calls for pause, for humility, for some of the same gestures as displayed in the behaviour of the Magi, for God is revealing something to us in this moment, in this epiphany. As the Psalmist says, “You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger” (Psalm 8:1-2). And Jesus himself said, “‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:3-5). The glory of the heavens and the humility of children—this is the image, the icon we receive from Scripture as we kneel beside the wise ones before the Christ child. Let us be humble and child-like, then, as we enter this epiphany and hear the word of the Lord to us today. Our text is about a journey and its cargo, an itinerary and an inventory. It asks us two existential questions: *Where are you going? What are you bringing?*

Where are you going? The Gospel says, “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’” (Matthew 2:1-2). The Magi actively seek God, they seek the birth of the king. They may not know exactly that it is God they seek, but by the end of the journey, they are worshipping Him. They read a sign in the annals of the heavens, and they followed it, just as Mary and Joseph followed the word of the Lord through the angels, just as the fishermen would follow the call of Jesus. It is not uncommon for me to hear people complain that God never visits them, that God has not appeared to them in some way, that they have been abandoned. Sometimes, I have felt that way myself. And there are many sorrows and tragedies in life that can make us feel this way, but I also wonder if this feeling is amplified by the fact that we have everything we want and more, much of it delivered to us mechanically and electronically. If I want a book, I can order one on Kindle and start reading it immediately. There are marvellous things to find like the works of Cyril of Jerusalem. Only 79 cents! And if I want a hard copy, I order it. It costs a bit more, but it is delivered to my door in a matter of days. In the time of Bede, the bishop purchased some land and all of its cattle. What for? To make some books! That was how book production began. You had to buy some land with cattle, because the cattle would be slaughtered, and the hides would be skinned and tanned to become the vellum on which you began the laborious process of writing in poorly lit scriptoria in the monasteries. It could take years to make good books. There is no need to travel today. Should I want to see a Romanesque cathedral or countless cats waiting for Greek fishermen to return to the docks in their boats, I will look it up online. One can even find worship services, sermons, theological lectures. Should I want to be entertained by fantasy, horror, comedy, romance or even informed by history and science, I will watch television or a streaming service. Medicine, groceries, and luxury items come to our homes and surround us with comforts. While in distant parts of the world, men, women and children scrabble to survive amid ruins, hunting for scraps of food, hiding from bombs or gunfire, I can sit on my sofa in peace and complain that God has not visited me during this winter.

There is a great distance between God and us. Every culture has known this in some way since prehistory. The great stories of antiquity are always about journeys—whether it is the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* the *Odyssey* of Homer, the *Journey West* of Xuan Zang, the wanderings of Odin, the voyages of Sinbad. Some of my favourite books in life have been about journeys—the *Travels* of Marco Polo, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Matsuo Basho, or the Russian spiritual classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim.* Without a sense of the tremendous distance, without some concept of the hardship, scale and impossibility of the venture, it is impossible to even begin thinking about God. And it is impossible to really think about God without, at the same time, taking some footsteps in the journey towards God. It is true that by the grace of God the Word became flesh to bridge the infinite distance we can never cross, but at times, God allows us to feel the distance, to remember and experience that distance, so that we will seek him. God has been seeking us since the dawn of time itself. Through nature, through provision, through disaster, through signs and wonders, through prophets and priests, through kings and commoners, through His very Son—God has sought us. And who have we sought? What have we sought? Are we really seeking God? Are we seeking what we want to make into God? The Scriptures teach us to seek the Lord constantly. In 1st Chronicles 22:19, it says: “Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the Lord your God.” When preaching in the Acropolis, the apostle Paul said that the whole meaning of history, with its rise and fall of nations and many cultures, was to draw people to God: “God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27). The prophet Jeremiah promises, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13); James says, “Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:8). And specifically to us, the Lord Jesus has said, “Seek first his kingdom and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Even in the midst of horror and tragedy, the one who penned Lamentations says: “The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him; to the one who seeks him” (Lamentations 3:25). All of our Scriptures and the commandments given to us are a means of journeying, but they are also revelations, epiphanies, if you will, of the endless God endlessly seeking us, seeking you and me. And they are maps for how to seek God in our daily experiences, in our relationships with friends and strangers, in our moments of solitary meditation. If God is indeed my salvation, my heaven, my comfort, my rock and refuge, my provider, the very love of my life—why should I travel anywhere but toward Him? And why do I stray from that path sometimes and seek the world instead of Him? Why do I not seek the courage to make the journey without hesitation, without reservation, without negotiation? Why do I not travel by the One Way to the One destination that is impossibly far but always close at hand (John 14:6)?

And what am I bringing on the journey? What are you carrying? The Gospel says, “When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9-11). For many, there are symbolic meanings to the gifts. What is undeniable is that they were costly, kingly gifts. The gifts reveal something of a paradox to us. God has given us everything in Christ. Why should we bring any gifts at all? Why do we give gifts in the first place? Throughout Scripture, we see gifts being given in worship and thanksgiving, in establishing social relations, in economics, in delivering prophetic symbols, and in furthering family dramas that weave together the weird strands of history that prepare the way for the coming of the King of Kings. Gifts are catalysts of change. What would have happened if Rebekah had not gifted the servant of Abraham and his camels with water? (Genesis 24), if Jacob had never given Joseph a beautiful coat (Genesis 37), if Abiathar had not given King David the sacred bread? (1 Samuel 21:1-7), if the Lord had not given Ezekiel a scroll to eat? (Ezekiel 3). A gift is a strange thing, it is simultaneously a thought and an action combined. I believe that unless we bring gifts to God, we do not fully appreciate what gifting means or what grace means. There is nothing we can give or do to save ourselves—God saves us through the gift of His Son, Jesus (Romans 5:18). And yet, just as the Magi had adored Jesus with their gifts and worship at his birth, a humble woman adored Jesus with a gift of costly perfume, anointing his feet and worshipping him just before his death (Mark 14:3-9, John 12:1-8). When we give, we become more like the Giver, we experience a greater revelation of the Giver, who is also the Greatest Gift. There are many different gifts in the kingdom of heaven. Some of them are callings, vocations, or roles given to us in the work of the Lord: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness” (Romans 12:3-8). Not all gifts relate to ministry, however. More important are the fruits of the Spirit that come as gifts when we abide in Christ, gifts we should strongly desire and cultivate: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Galatians 5:22-23). The greatest gifts Paul speaks of are faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13). And there is also godliness, another one of the greatest gifts. Paul says: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16). Godliness thus begins with the mystery of the gospel, the whole gospel, living in you and radiating through you. It is both the narrative of the Word made flesh and the presence and Spirit of the Word made flesh animating your life. Godliness is also a disposition and manner of behaving that results from this animation, as the apostle also says: “Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Timothy 6:2-8). Imagine, a gift that makes you so content that you need nothing but your food and clothing! That is godliness. Lastly, godliness is an aspiration, a dream, if you will, of serving God with everything of your being; as the apostle says: “Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening…Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’, and, ‘Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness.’ In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work. Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:14-22). Godliness is thus the gift of a spiritual ambition, a desire for deeper holiness and nobler service, a longing to be closer to God in all things. A desire for travel. Godliness is a gift that embarks on a journey to the Giver. It is not opposed to faith, hope or love because it cannot exist without them, nor can they exist without godliness. Godliness is the quest for the gift that is God Himself.

What gifts are you taking with you on your journey and where are you journeying today? What do you want to bring to the King of Kings born in Bethlehem? Why should one speak of ministries, spiritual fruit, and godliness? Those are valid questions. And they are to be answered with further questions. What does a good king want? The happiness, health, freedom, safety, and virtue of his subjects. What does a good parent want? The happiness, health, freedom, safety and virtue of his children. The only thing that makes God happy is happiness, and he would see that happiness flourish in us. The only thing we can give to God is ourselves, more and more of ourselves, to receive more and more of His gifts, more and more of happiness, more and more of God Himself. What are the gifts that make us happy? The gift of the journey. When God seems far, it is time to set out. The road ahead is the gift. As Jeremiah the prophet says, “Remember the LORD in a distant land” (Jeremiah 51:50). The gift of the gifts. They are everything we see in the Christ child, everything we desire in Christ: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people” (Ephesians 4:8). They are gifts of true love, which are far more precious than gold, frankincense and myrrh. Bring yourself. Bring your desire. Bring your adoration Bring everything you have. Bring beatitude. Bring salt and light.