



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Epiphany of the Lord 2025

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6, Ps 71, Ephesians 3: 2-3, 5-6, Matthew 2: 1-12

When the architects of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, elected to have bas - relief of the Magi over the door, they cannot have known the extraordinary effect it would have on the Persian invaders three centuries down the road. When the marauding armies of the Sassanian Empire engulfed the Holy Land, they smashed every available church. Their militant Zoroastrianism very shortly to be replaced by the unleashing of the forces of Islam which would sweep away four empires with its sword in the coming half century. The 4th century Nativity Church, Bethlehem survived because the Persian troops saw that carving over the door – the men from the East in Persian robes and bearing a remarkable similarity to themselves. They were yet to inherit the iconoclasm of Islam and, truth to tell, never really did. Had they done so the world would have been robbed of the great artistic tradition of the Persian miniature and its riotous display of colour in tight battle array.

Such are the enigmas of fate which haunt the history of the Faith. Nevertheless Islam itself, while waxing correctly on the Virgin Birth, has no room for the Epiphany – Jesus Christ being for them a prophet and not the Son of God. The revelation of a god incarnate has no place in the religion of Mohammed.

Curiously, if you sift through Islam, there is one place where the Epiphany is recognised. but that is in a branch of Islam that is not itself recognised by either of the main divisions of that religion, nor any of the other multifarious sects splintered from it.

The one acknowledgement of Epiphany is among the Alawites. They are a small Levantine sect, in origin secretive and mystical, believing in a trinity of sorts but rather as three aspects of God rather than three persons and philosophical rather than personal. The reason you may have heard of them is that they have been the tribe that has had a long political grip on the benighted peoples of Syria through the sixty years of excesses and cruelties that have been the hallmark of the Assad regime.

For Christians the Epiphany is a time of revealing of secrets and historical purpose and much rejoicing. For most of us it is a time when we might recall, with profound

thanksgiving, that moment when it became clear that the long chosen-ness of Israel was in order to reconcile the world to the one true God and fulfil the promise to Abraham that, through him, all the nations of the Earth would be blessed. It was the moment when we, once distant, pagan foreigners were seen to approach the portal of salvation and be welcomed in. Truth is, we don't even think of it apart from today. We take for granted God's inclusion and mercy. This is a pity. Its import is underlined by its appearance in Matthew's Gospel – the Gospel most directed towards the original Jewish community, the Gospel that opens by treating us to a rehearsal of the immense genealogy of Jesus, the bloodline that certifies that He is Jewish and of the royal line of David, the once and future king. In other words He is Kosher. (Unlike the wretched Herodians whose 'half-breed' status was a constant and unsettling impediment to their legitimacy.) Suddenly, the bastion of Jewish exclusiveness is breached by the coming of the Christ for the whole world. Not that Jews were suddenly irrelevant – far from it (see Paul in Romans which is another whole series of sermons). But, at once, in Christ, the people that walked in darkness had seen a great light. In the case of the Magi, literally. The long sealed Gates of Eden, for the pagans, were ajar and that glimpse of light would eventually expand to a dazzling brightness and welcome home as the gifts of the Magi played out their prophetic role in the life of the Messiah. Gold for His royal Sovereignty, Frankincense for His Great High Priesthood, Myrrh for His Burial. The sacrificial death that will destroy the power of death over those in Christ. The smoke ascending from the altar, reminding us of the fragrance of Christ and the prayers of the Saints accompanying the Sacrifice and lifting us Heavenward. The irreducible purity of gold that has passed through the fire, the unchanging currency of Earth.

The gifts are in order. Christ's Kingship and sovereignty and authority are acknowledged. His Priesthood is in the offering of the once, only once and once for all Sacrifice of Himself – which can never be repeated but which, by the mystery of the Mass, be daily re-presented on the altars of Christendom until His return to wind up the bloody sheet of History in the Last Judgement.

And last, but by no means least, that little block of aromatic mud that will preserve the body but whose task will be overtaken by events. The place of death, sealed and guarded, will see the myrrh-bearers be apprised of the truth that will revolutionise Man's understanding of God and of His salvation. The myrrh will lead them to the tomb but it will not be needed for the slaughtered but now death defeating, Hell harrowing, Risen Body of the Lord.

All these are locked in this little tale of wisdom and pilgrimage and royal quest, along with the power of dream and the terrible cost of when human intelligence takes over from divine wisdom. But that, you will be relieved to know, is for another time.