Sermon the Feast of the Epiphany 2022

And they say Christianity is an institutional religion concerned with buildings, external doctrines and external rituals! How did they get that idea? Well from portions of it’s worldwide history of course, but that’s a mere surface analysis.

The adoption of Roman bureaucratic practices, soaring temples of stone and the beauty of words and ideas, important as they are, can’t explain how Christianity became the most culturally diverse movement in human history.

What explains it far more adequately are the readings occasioned by today’s feast, the Feast of the Epiphany.

The readings on this feast and the season after it is the beginning of an unfolding, the unfolding of the birth of Jesus, the 12th day of Christmas. This “12th day” never actually ends because there is no end to the unfolding meaning of Christ.

This unfolding is both a breadth, that is a revelation to all nations and cultures, and a depth, a continually deepening understanding of how Christ helps humans relate to all that is and never be afraid of all that is yet to be learned.

That there is explains why Christianity is what it is and how it can continually remake itself over time and across the vast array of cultures it has touched and affected.

This “open door,” this “vision,” this “light” is what we mark today, propitiously arranged in the Northern Hemisphere at the beginning of the year and the beginning of the lengthening of the daylight hours.

If we look first at St. Paul in our second reading, we find a message that is intense. Paul references his unique encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus road and all that flows from that.

He says it was a “revelation,” not some personal opinion, but, rather a new understanding of things, indeed a new relationship with God, even though he himself was in a relationship with God previously in his role as an interpreter of Israel’s scripture and by virtue of his role as a leader in Israelite society.

He thinks of this “revelation” not as mere information, how could he! But as an orientation to a new path, a “grace” and a “stewardship” that he’s been given, not for his own sake but for the benefit of others.

He also refers to it as a “mystery” that is being unveiled. The most counterintuitive thing the ancient world had ever experienced.

All the great thinkers and religions had, until that point, thought in terms of caste system, even Aristotle thought of slaves as “naturally inferior” and here is Paul, claiming that all are the same, all beholden to the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

It is in our story from the gospel that we get the great enactment of what Paul is saying. Gentile astrologers come from the East. The East in terms of culture, religious thinking, politics. They have no relation to the Jewish milieu into which Jesus has been born.

They represent all the nations, the beauty and wisdom of all traditions and forms of knowledge in which the human race has sought for the truth and meaning of our existence and for the One who might show us these things.

Though we read of their journey in scripture, we note that they have been led, not by any scripture, not by any prophetic insight, but by the natural world itself, by a cosmological wonder. What it was we know not though all kinds of efforts have been made to prove it was a comet or some such tangible event.

We must reckon with something profound here; all worthy wisdom and knowledge, once it is grasped has the power to move people to undertake a quest, a daring journey after greater understanding and insight.

Indeed it is that word, in-sight, a synonym for the word “epiphany,” we might even say “enlightenment” that explains how something observed might lead to a great journey of discovery.

This is not mere information. It is a conviction that what we come to understand has implications for *my* journey through life.

It is the type of conviction that enables us to recognize that life is a risk and that in order to encounter life’s meaning the God who gives it meaning we will need to take the risk of faith expressing itself in actions!

This story helps us value all wisdom and knowledge traditions that lead to truth and understanding.

I recently heard that there is a direct correlation between the loss of indigenous languages and the loss of bio-diversity.

This because, amongst the thousands of indigenous languages is couched an almost impossible to repeat accumulation of knowledge as it relates to plant life, the dependencies of certain animals on certain plants and the way a particular environment holds together.

All of which makes sense, for if a particular indigenous group were to become established in a certain locale over the period of thousands of years it would have to do so through careful observation of how everything works together.

I use this example because latent in the story of the magi is a lost knowledge! How did they discern that a star was the harbinger of a new King, a new Jewish King, someone so important that they, from a completely foreign civilization, should undertake the journey of a lifetime in order to encounter him.

Christianity, at its best, has been to the different streams of wisdom and knowledge that lead to truth; at its worst, it has sought to control how people know things or curtails the resources by which people come to know things; when it does this it has missed the meaning of this great feast, in my humble opinion.

On Feb 9th we’ll be hosting, if overlord omicron will let us, a world religions conference on the topic “How we Rise” (after a huge challenge) and each major world religion will present their take on this question.

This feast celebrates such an interfaith exchange because these men, of a different religion, and following their knowledge of the “natural world,” only get so far. Once in Jerusalem, they consult the Jewish scriptures in dialogue with other sages of a different faith.

Precision is important in their quest; once they have consulted the scripture and learned that Bethlehem is the place of the Messiah’s birth they once again see the cosmic sign.

What is demonstrated here is important for us, it’s the spiral of understanding. We get an intuition, we take the risk of acting, but then we need more precision so we study, we dialogue, and then we are ready to encounter our intuition, our previous wisdom from a new perspective and the journey can continue.

We can’t come to God on our own, our personal epiphany is by definition a social phenomenon, a community endeavour, even if, as it turns out in their case and in many churches, there are those who pretend to help but actually mean to do us harm.

But deep in our psyche, our dreams, our spidey-sense, we will, if we’ve been healed of past trauma, know who to trust and when to be led by a different road.

When they arrive where the child is staying—we think this is probably Nazareth and not Bethlehem—we find this lovely and entirely appropriate scene in which the Magi, now representing the entire human race, worship the child Jesus with Mary his mother.

There is fulfillment in our quest even though things are not cozy or safe; immediately after their quest is fulfilled they are warned in a dream not to go back to their homeland by the same road.

The jubilant prophecy of Isaiah is appropriate here, offered hundreds of years before this event: “Rise up, Jerusalem!” We are that community. Even though darkness still covers the land…upon us the Lord shines and over us has appeared God’s glory!

I often feel very sluggish at this time of the year, like I’m in hibernation, but the message of Epiphany is that we can throw off that sluggishness and embrace the quest again, this year, in our own way, using the lights of our intuition, our conversations with wise and trusted counsellors, our study of sacred text and the testimony of others.

We celebrate in this feast the realization that God desires all nations to know the divine life and gifts and that within each culture and within each person there is already placed the possibility of such a quest, such a faith.

Today we have the opportunity, at the beginning of 2022, to reaffirm that we too, will respond to the call, to quest after truth, beauty and goodness wherever and in whomever we find them and so find ourselves at the feet of Christ, worshipping, living into the fulfillment that is available in Him.