

**Our lives should be signs  
of the presence of Christ in the world.  
There's more to life than 'eat, drink and be merry...'**

I had an epiphany this week, and it was quite a frightening epiphany. It did affect me very profoundly. And I had a funeral, and my mother taught me if you're catching a train at 2:00, get there for 1:00. And I'm like that with funerals, so I was there very early. And so I caught the end, or rather the bulk of the funeral before me, as I was in the vestry, and I could hear everything of course. And it was being led by, I think, it was the sister of the deceased, whom she referred to as David. She was leading the 'service'... And the epiphany came with the F word, so I won't repeat it. She started off saying,

"As Dave would say, let's put the mm-mm fun in this funeral."

Well, I was a bit horrified, my first reaction, and then I started to ponder the situation. And, yeah, I had to sit back... And this was the epiphany I was sent to myself, but surely these people who liked this person wanted to send him off well. And so I thought,

"Well, there can't be malice in it."

And then I suddenly had another epiphany, which was that I'm old and bear no relation to this generation who've never known God and I don't understand even where they're coming from to open a funeral service in that fashion. And then I started to ask myself,

"Well, is this a modern phenomenon of not being able to cope with death and finality, so we have to party, we have to make it fun round the deceased?" We knew it wasn't fun, of course, because they were crying and breaking down. That was the irony. Or was it the reality, were they actually celebrating their belief system,

"Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die. This is the only life you've got. Let's have the fun, and let's thank everyone here for sharing fun with David." ?

The other epiphany was,

"How do you address what seems an empty and shallow surface of approach to death and life?"

And it threw me back asking,

"What on earth has this feast of the Epiphany got to do with the modern pagan generation?"

And so, as I was pondering this, I thought, well, there are three symbols in today's feast, of course, because it celebrates not just today's gospel but the baptism next week and the wedding feast at Cana, which I think is the week after, which is all about the Messiah being revealed to the nations.

And, of course, the wedding feast at Cana, John says, is a sign. He has seven signs in his gospel that point to the nature of Christ. He uses the word signs, meaning symbols. And that hit me again, the epiphany. I thought,

"We're losing, in the secular world, a sense of symbol," because symbol connects us to mystery. It connects us to the past, it connects us to the history of our nation, the history of my family, the communion with others. Connection is the most important thing that binds the fabric of people together. And symbol is the way we do it, because we can't express it just in words what we mean.

You know the thing I mean. A kiss, a kiss is a symbol, because it's not just a sign of affection, it creates it. And that's what a symbol should do. A symbol makes present to us all the mystery of life. And I thought, 'Right, this was part of my epiphany, that the symbols and signs of our faith speak to us but do we value them? Do we treasure them? Do we immerse ourselves in them? Do we live them so that they actually shine forth as something of a living religion?'

And then the baptism of the Lord is another epiphany of this feast, the main character, well I know Jesus is the main character, at one level, but the main character, of course, is John the Baptist, and he's a powerful sign and symbol of witness, that his life and our life should point out the Messiah when He's present.

We say, in our faith, don't we, that God is everywhere, that Jesus is everywhere. And we don't ever bring Jesus to a situation, He's there, albeit unseen. And our role is to reveal Him when people don't see Him. To point out in a none arrogant way, not a pious way, but a practical way the footsteps of God in their lives. And that threw me back on this feast, that that's important too. Our level of witness as a community and as individuals, that we immerse ourselves in the mystery of the incarnation. Do our lives speak to others? Does my life? I couldn't be John the Baptist, and yet, he calls us to something profound in this secular world in which he functioned and worked.

And then I came full circle back to the wise men, because the wise men were pagans, but in the ancient world, and there was a great tradition for this, they were searchers of knowledge. They sought truth, they sought the footprints of the divine, to understand the cosmos, to understand the purpose of life and meaning. And so they were open to the signs, which seems in opposition to today's current paganism that doesn't seem open to reading the signs and looking for the fullness of truth or objectivity. So that brought me back to preaching wisdom, that we need to be able to tackle the secular world on what is wise, what is the right or correct action.

And then the lovely little touch at the end of the gospel, when they knew what Herod was about, it says they went back another route. And maybe that's a sign to us. We have to look at other routes we can take in our approach to the secular world.