

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Today as we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ we come back again to the theme of light. At midnight mass I spoke about light shining in the darkness and the hand of God in bringing salvation. The Epiphany is taken from the Greek word for revelation, ἐπιφάνω, to make known, to manifest. This is the day when the wise travellers, the astrologers who had seen a new star, arrive to witness the child predicted to be king of the Jews. The story from Matthew's gospel speaks of gifts given fit for a king. The gold and frankincense are straight from the prophecy of Isaiah, gifts which proclaim the glory of the Lord in the traditions of the Hebrew people. They are given from the nations which come to see the light, travelling from far away and drawn together.

The final gift is myrrh, not mentioned in Isaiah. This gift refers to the destiny of this child, that for him there will be a tomb. Myrrh contains the fragrance of incense, but in its resinous state is also used for embalming. Remember the hymn, We three kings – myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb... Myrrh is the Christ gift that prefigures Good Friday.

The wise travellers are the traditional symbol of the Epiphany, always three in the nativity scenes, each bearing a gift. We always set up the 'three wise men' around the stable although they don't arrive until Epiphany. Some churches have the travellers placed to move closer to the scene each week of Advent until their arrival on 6 January, or the Sunday nearest. The problem is that we rarely will have the same people we had during Christmas services come again in the first week of January and so we compress it all into one story. In the bible, we learn that it could be up to two years before the travellers arrive, based on the age of infants Herod ordered to be executed in his desperate search for the child predicted to be king of the Jews. The stable is long gone, and Jesus is with Mary in a house.

However, we are here today with the traditional nativity scene complete with wise men three. Have you noticed that in these scenes one of them is always kneeling to present the gift? The text tells us that they all (not mentioned as three) knelt down to pay him homage. In our scene here it is a black man kneeling. In my set at home and in my daughter's house it is the black man kneeling. I have been pondering this for a little while and haven't really felt that comfortable with the scene. Really, they should all be kneeling – what is going on?

This last week the world grieved the loss of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a great figure in the worldwide church of God. Tutu was a liberation theologian and activist for human rights. He is remembered for many things, but best remembered for his role in ending the evil regime of apartheid in South Africa, for which he earned the Nobel Peace Prize. He worked alongside Nelson Mandela – two giant figures of black liberation and human rights. He pressured foreign powers to oppose the South African economic system. Whilst he was a powerful activist Tutu always stressed non-violent protest. He worked as the hand of Jesus against terrible injustice, a true man of God.

Apartheid is in the living memory of most of us here. Although the law which sanctioned the racial segregation of apartheid was repealed in 1991 and multiracial democratic elections held in 1994, vast disparity in human rights continued and still exists today. When I was a child, I remembered that the South African cricket team was not allowed to tour Australia because of apartheid, and I can remember the anti-apartheid violence all over the news. Some of you have closer experiences with relatives living in South Africa.

Desmond Tutu's face was prominently in the media. He smiled a lot, and as we have learned since his death he cried a lot, especially in his role as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which brought to light terrible crimes from both whites and blacks in the turbulent pre and post-apartheid years. Tutu

oversaw the introduction of women priests in the Anglican Church in South Africa, and he campaigned for gay rights.

Tutu globalised the African philosophy of ubuntu, and he applied the theology of liberation to it. Some of you may be more familiar than I with the term ubuntu. It is basically a philosophy of personhood in which a person is a person through other people. Ubuntu demands ethical relations between people and through this one's personhood is formed. It is a word which has had currency in politics, business and western philosophy, a trending term which was not lived out with the true demands of reciprocity of relations of ubuntu between white and black people in South Africa.

Land dispossession is still a major cause of poverty among black South Africans. A minority of 9% white people own 72% agricultural land while a majority of 79% of black people own 4% of agricultural land. Without having major land holdings, the black people cannot rise above the poverty of dispossession. With a staggering 74% youth unemployment among black South Africans, there is a long way to go. The ethical demands of ubuntu in cities like Cape Town has been failed in the vistas of cramped shacks and unsanitary conditions where most of the black population live. It is no wonder the black people do not regard a white person as a person. They are called *abelunga*, not a person, because they do not show respectful social relations with black people, and they will not restore the land. The result is that Cape Town is one of the most violent cities in the world.

Within this tense racial environment Desmond Tutu practiced grace and forgiveness, bringing Christ to the concept of ubuntu. As I have reflected on his passing, I have thought about the bringing of light which was the gift he gave to the people of South Africa, black and white alike. And I have thought about the wise kneeling black man. Was it unconscious in the production of these western style nativities that the black man is kneeling while the others are standing? Or does it say something deeper? On a surface it might be seen that the black man is

kneeling because he has a lower social status. On the other hand, the black man is kneeling because he is practising proper respect toward another and opening his human self to the one he sees as the source of the light. Ubuntu requires mutual respect, and all should kneel as Christ knelt before the disciples to wash their feet.

In the Christ child the nations are drawn together to the light of salvation. The light shines through the darkness of racial segregation and inter-racial violence toward a restoring future. May we all be the one who longs to kneel before the king to present gifts both humble and rich, and as we kneel, may we always look for the Christ in the other person, knowing that we are made human in one another.