Sermon on Epiphany Sunday 2016

Happy New Years everyone and especially if you’ve got some Irish blood in you! 2016 is the centenary of the Irish uprising in 1916 that eventually led to Irish independence.

The widely scattered Irish populations of our world are planning many and varied celebrations. Apparently the Irish come of their wanderlust honestly; scientists have analyzed the genome of an Irish woman farmer who lived 5200 years ago in Ireland; they’ve discovered that her roots were Middle Eastern.

They also analyzed the genomes of three Irish men from the bronze age 4000 years ago and discovered that their distant roots were from the Black Sea region of the Ukraine!

Nobody studying Irish history and lineage might have guessed that Irish roots came from that far afield; an astounding journey for that time in human history, although it probably was made over the course of many centuries as migrations gradually made their way across Europe.

It would seem that we’re not so easily satisfied! I mean how else do you explain a journey that takes you from the beautiful climate and beaches of the Black sea to the emerald isle where you never ask whether it’s raining only “what type of rain is it today?”

Of course many of our journeys originate from desperation; it is almost too awful to contemplate the journeys undertaken this past year by the refugees from all over the Middle East, Alan Kurdi’s little body lying on the beach the symbol for how those journeys can go terribly wrong.

As we discover more about human origins we discover that humans are both settlers and journeyers. Even when we’ve found something good, even when we have it good, as many of us do, the tune “still haven’t found what I’m looking for” plays in the background.

Perhaps this is a partial explanation of our gospel reading that is assigned to this great feast!

Our gospel reading highlights the fact that God, using the natural world and the stories of scripture draws us forward on a spiritual journey of discovery that shapes our lives.

We learn from this story that the journey of faith requires from us our very best discernment and involves using what we’ve been enabled to acquire, whether in intellectual gifts (the calling of astrologer was a respected and important calling in the ancient world) as well as our treasure.

The gifts that the astrologers offer to the Christ Child are not frivolous dollar store extras but important benefactions that will shortly enable, as we would learn if we kept reading, the Christ Child’s family to endure their forced flight to Egypt as they escape Herod’s fear.

The manner of the astrologers’ journey is also instructive, tradition says there were three because of the three gifts, but we don’t know; however many, they travelled as a community; they were a community spiritual explorers.

We live in a culture in which it is more and more assumed that organized religion is bad for us and that any spiritual journey we take must, in order to be authentic, be solitary.

But Christ leads us forward as communities; we need the perspectives of the others in our midst.

I’m sure that there must have been much give and take amongst the wise men as they travelled debating meaning, location and best practices, maybe they even had to forge an informal code of conduct after a couple of raucous arguments.

Maybe one threatened to leave in a huff and the others had to wait patiently while he came to his senses.

All conjecture to be sure, but surely not far from the mark, these are human beings we’re talking about and since I’m a man I can say it: these are men we’re talking about!

Peter Elliot, the Dean of the Cathedral recently put out a wonderful 10 minute video on why it’s so wrong to say that organized religion is passe.

Of course there are religious communities that are irrelevant, unhelpful and some are even dangerous, but there are social and spiritual needs that humans have that can only be met in a faith community including the great relief that comes from recognizing that it’s safe to be with people who you don’t always see eye to eye with.

It’s a great relief to many to find that there is a community which is inclusive of all social and economic differences; a community that make sense of life passages by relating our lives to the fundamental stories that have shaped western civilization; a community that provides avenues for us to meaningfully serve in ways that go beyond our jobs, ways of service we could never do on our own.

One of the things that Peter points out is particularly relevant for this text and for this feast: the role of beauty in our spiritual journey.

The astrologers seem to have been drawn by the beauty of the star, by the wonder of creation. The Church can be a place where, through music, art and ideas woven together in story, poetry, sacrament and even preaching we can be confronted by God who in words made famous by St. Augustine is “Beauty even ancient ever new.”

It is for this reason that we’ve adopted an experimental vision statement that says: St. Matthew is a community in which we are helping each other explore God’s Beauty, Truth and Goodness.

Beauty is not the only thing that the wise astrologers were drawn to, it may not be the only reason you’ve been drawn here today but without beauty without wonder our lives turn stale and churlish, full of the practical and urgent, not bad things to be sure, unless they take over.

Often the way forward on our own spiritual journey’s is to ask the question, “What is it about God, about the Scriptures, Creation, this Community that is drawing me in, causing me to linger, to explore; what is it that is wondrous and beautiful?

Let desire draw you. That sounds dangerous but it’s what’s going to happen anyway so let it be! Epiphany, for the magi, for you and I begins in desire, in wonder.

Of course, this journey, the journey that all of us are on is also concerned with Truth. Who was this King? Who is God for us? What’s God really like? How can I pray effectively and in a transforming way?

When we commit together as a community to help each other explore God’s Beauty, Truth and Goodness we do two things simultaneously: we open up to reality wherever we happen to find it, in the “natural world,” in Scripture, in conversation, dreams (somewhere Carl Jung is clapping), in experience, study and in travel.

Christianity and our Great Tradition is not a closing off of avenues by which we might come to live in Reality, capital R, but rather an opening of many doors.

As has been said many times if this world is God’s creation, by whatever means God created it, then all truth is God’s truth.

But we are also given access to a powerful bs detector. We can begin to recognize that often we haven’t been pursuing truth, that we’ve allowed ourselves to be captured by mere information or by trivial pursuits.

We begin to understand that so much that captures our attention is mere surface nothingness that will not make a difference in my life or the life of the world around us.

A realization that, if we let it, leads to repentance, a change of mind about what is worthwhile; and when begin to repent daily, as a lifestyle, we are on a journey that is central to Christ’s own purpose, a journey from sin towards goodness.

We begin to help each other explore God’s Goodness when we reckon, not only that God is good but that we might yet become good! As Paul famously said in 1 Corinthians 13, to understand all mysteries but have not love makes us nothing.

We are creatures created with and for Love; as the writer to the Ephesians said, “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

Your character is the one thing you take with you when you die; it is the thing most worthy of your time, talent and treasure. The development of St. Matthew’s vision is hugely worthy goal that will change all of our lives if we say yes to the journey!

The last line of our text says that, having heeded God’s dream warning, the wise men go back to their own country “by another road.”

The journey of Epiphany, of opening to and of helping each other explore God’s Beauty, Truth and Goodness will lead us not in quite the same way in 2016 as we’ve been led in 2015.

We may not end up on the emerald island; the magi do go back after all; but whether we end up in a new place or back home by a different road, the journey will change us; we’re going where Christ is going, it’s in our genome!