

And the Word was made.....

Yesterday morning, I sat listening to a man telling of his battle with alcohol. He finally admitted that he had a problem, he said, while living in Thailand and so, as he had a Catholic background, he went to the Catholic Cathedral looking for help. There he met an Irish priest and told him that he could not stop drinking. The priest listened attentively and then asked him about himself, but when he discovered that the man was living with one of the local girls he seemed concerned only that he should move house and stop indulging in extra-marital sex. The man went away un-helped and into the arms of his next bottle.

Last Sunday at Mass, we recalled the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem – it was the Epiphany, which means "the revealing". And it brought to mind a Mass I attended, on that day, several years previously, in Westminster Cathedral - and also the sermon preached at that Mass. The priest began by saying that the Wise Men were called from a far country to be shown the "Great Secret" and, then, proceeded to tell of their journey towards that great encounter. My curiosity was piqued and I wondered what he was going to say the Great secret was, but he ended by telling how the Wise men entered the stable and came face to face with the Great Secret – and, with that, he made the sign of the cross and walked back to his seat, the sermon ended. I do not think I have ever been quite so disappointed with a sermon as on that occasion – I wanted to know what the priest understood was being given in the Epiphany, for the mere doctrine that God became man did not satisfy that 'want' in me. It was as I sat listening to the tale of my alcoholic friend's encounter with the Irish cleric in Thailand that I began to realise what the Epiphany was showing us.

There came to mind another sermon I heard, some twenty years ago, by Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila. He was talking about the Patron of the Philippines, the *Santo Nino*, the Holy Child. "We Filipinos", he said, "get frightened by the thought of 'Christ, the Eternal Word' or 'Christ the Judge, who is to come', but we are not frightened of the Holy Child. We know what to do with a child", he said, "we hold the child, we love the child for we know that no matter how poor or wretched the place where we live, the child will be happy - as long as he is loved and wanted."

The "Great Secret", revealed in the Epiphany is that God comes to us like a child - happy to be with us, wherever we are, as long as he is loved and wanted. He does not first demand that we move to a more acceptable place before he condescends to live with us – he comes to be with us where we are - and not where we, or others, think we ought to be.

The Irish cleric is not alone in missing what the Great Secret truly is. Law is so much a part of our ideas on religion, that many of us live and act as though the Word was made Law – and that the only way to approach Christ is to live up to the demands of the Law. We forget that laws are made by man – and are still being made by man both in the Church and in Society as we try to balance one good against another as conflict arises in our daily lives. Law points to some good that is worthwhile pursuing – thus traffic laws, telling us which side of the road to drive on, point to the need for all people to get where they are going in safety. Moral laws are the same, pointing to a good which helps us live in peace with each other – but whereas traffic laws can be applied to all times and places, moral laws depend on the person's ability to live up to the demands of justice, compassion and charity, for we do not all start at the same place.

The fundamental task of Law, in religion or morals, is to point out the path, which the wisdom of past generations indicates will lead us to happiness, but it cannot say where I personally must be on that path. It may be that I have not get got as far along the path as others; it may be that I have not yet found the courage or hope to even begin, but wherever I am, Christ will come to be with me where I am and it is in his company that I find the desire and strength to journey. The Law gives a glimpse of the Far Country, towards which we are journeying, but says nothing about my ability to walk that path. The road to God must be the road of our humanity and the only place we can begin the journey is where we

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are - how else could Abraham be called "Our Father in Faith"? For history in the Bible comes long before the Law was given through Moses!

My own faith story really began when, on my knees, I opened my heart and asked for help, asked the Lord to be with me where I was. He came. And listening to others I have come to see no matter how wrecked the house, no matter how despised the place – or person, the Lord will come. The Gospel points to this when it tells us of the only person we know to be in heaven – and that is the thief who died next to Christ. He asked, "Remember me!" and what the Epiphany points to happened.

Yesterday, as I continued listening to the alcoholic, who sought help from the Irish cleric and was given a book of laws instead, he told how God had finally come to him, where he was: in his addiction, in his messy personal relationships, in his need. That man is now free from the chains of his addiction and, I heard, growing in love and compassion. He did not have to live up to the Law in order for the help of God to come; God came first and then he began to grow. Jesus was born in a stable - not the nice comfortable, stables we see portrayed in Christmas cribs, but a muck-filled, stinking stable. He came and was happy to do so, for the people he came to wanted him and in their love for him, the stable gradually changed into the Holy City. A book of Laws cannot do that – a Child who wants to be loved can. That is the Great Secret.

Diary

I have not had such a great beginning to the New Year. My pc fell off my work-table and I had to replace my hard drive – and, in the process, lost some photos of my brother's visit last month. I, then, decided to celebrate the New Year with a swim and forgot that I had my mobile in the pocket of my swimming trunks. A friend of mine, then, suggested that I put the phone in the sun to dry – and I am now told that was the worst thing I could have done. The phone was new – my Christmas present to myself, because my old one had given up the ghost. However, a few days before I had my swim, one of the parishioners from the Church, here in Bali, gave me a Christmas present of a new phone. Could the Lord have known of the notorious swim I was going to take a few days later?

Progress in my house is beginning to happen, but something had to be changed in the bathroom, which meant that I needed a few more tiles. I went to the shop where I had bought them only to be told that the line had been discontinued. We have been trying to work out how to put something else in to cover the spaces – but it is not working and so it looks like we shall have to strip the bathroom and start again with new tiles.

In this part of the world, you often see the Taoist "yin-yang" symbol (like two tadpoles, on black and one white, turning in a circle). It points to the idea that the world is held in balance. So, if I have had such a disastrous beginning to the year, maybe the rest of the year will balance it up!

I have a priest friend of mine from Sarawak, Father Simon Poh, coming on Mondays to spend a few days with me. That should be pleasant – now I have to work out where to take him.

God bless,

Terry

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