



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Epiphany of the Lord – A, B, C

Wise men

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6, Ps 71, Ephesians 3: 2-3, 5-6, Matthew 2: 1-12

There is an interlude, during the early evening on Radio 4, which the BBC self-referentially celebrates as 'The Home of Comedy'. With the exception of 'I'm Sorry I haven't a Clue', most of this is dedicated to dire programming that would regularly fail the Trades Description test for humour. It usually consists of a selection of favoured ranters launching unopposed verbal assaults on those who do not reflect the preferred politics and culture of the Corporation but who still, of course, have the considerable privilege of paying for it.

I had the misfortune to be tuned into one of the poorer efforts last week while driving home. The 'comedian' was pulling Christmas Crackers. The crackers turned out to have no prizes or funny hats but only random de-contextualised Bible Verses. Even more astonishing was that these crackers did not make the required popping sound. This, and please hold onto your sides here and make sure you have plastic sheeting on the pews, is 'because they were Christian Crackers...and Christians don't believe in the 'Big Bang'. BaBoom

As you can imagine I nearly had to pull off the road as I was engulfed in the consequent tidal wave of hilarity.

The tragedy of the 'joke' was that it wasn't even a near miss. It was an inadvertent celebration of modernist ignorance and the profound educational deficit that surrounds most anti-Christian prejudice.

The reality is that the man who first proposed the 'Big Bang Theory' was George Le Maitre. Or to give him his proper title, Fr. Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian priest who was Professor of Physics at the Catholic University of Leuven and a noted astronomer. He was not the least in a long line of Christian explorers of the natural world including Gregor Mendel, the Austrian monk and founding father of modern genetics and Isaac Newton, perhaps the greatest pre-modern scientist whose religious works were greater in volume than his ground breaking physics. Indeed when I was at college training for ministry we were unexpectedly joined by a 50 year old man called John Polkinghorne who had recently resigned the Chair of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge to train for the priesthood and would spend the rest of his life teaching the coherence of both disciplines – Natural Science and Theology.

In short the caricature of Christian teaching as mind numbing fundamentalism and puerile fairy tale does not stand up to the history of intellectual engagement. The word science derives from the word for 'knowledge'. The natural scientist is primarily interested in the 'HOW'. The theologian is interested in the ultimate 'WHY'. They both have a massive vested interest in a Grand Unified Theory of everything.

On this feast of the revelation to the Wise Men (Epiphany) it is important to celebrate the mutual achievements of wisdom revealed.

The Magi are very different from the shepherds. The shepherds came because of direct revelation. That is how some people come to Christ.

The Wise Men came after prolonged study, reasoning, disputation and a long and sometimes confusing journey, including some false presumptions and dangerous detours. But they come and they worship and they prophesy, in their gifts, the truth about Jesus.

Some of us are shepherds, simple, moved by the revelation. Some of us are Magi, the long intellectual struggle and the road far from the comfort of home. The shepherd should never despise the Magus for his struggle. The Magus should never despise the shepherd for his simplicity. We both come to Jesus.

The Church has sometimes struggled with the journeys of her children but she has learnt, and exemplified in her scientific sons and daughters, that she has nothing to fear from the truth. She permits belief in or agnosticism about Darwinism, for example. What she does not countenance is the atheistic Darwinism that eliminates a Creator, a first cause. Nor does she countenance a theory that leads to Social Darwinism – the survival of the fittest and its consequent eugenics and cruelty which so disfigured the last hundred years. She does not respect the fundamentalism of Atheism which is, by its very nature, unscientific. She can engage with the agnostic who, in the face of bewildering and confusing evidence cannot claim certainty.

We are, after all, people of faith. As Marilynne Robinson, the American Calvinist writer put it, 'What we do not know should always function as a corrective to anything we think we do know. Religion, like science, celebrates mystery'.

We will, in our respective disciplines, never plumb the full mystery of the Eternal One, the origin and end of Man. What we can do and must do is make the journey together.

Christians must be fully engaged. We must know our stuff. We must encourage our children in the deepest enquiry of which they are capable. We must not leave the marketplace of ideas to the lazy misrepresentations of the media commentariat or the ignorant assumptions of the socially conditioned Vox Pop.

We engage confident in the profound scientific and theological work of our forebears and knowing, shepherd or wise man, that the truth will always, at some point return to the One all other religions, philosophies and scientific nostrums seek to explain or explain away. The truth will lead us always back to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The truth will lead us always back to the babe in the arms of Mary. There we will kneel, present our gifts, and adore and return home by a different way.