

## **Epiphany's fairytale – Homily for the Feast of Epiphany**

Isaiah 60.1–6

Ephesians 3.1–12

Matthew 2.1–12

The story of the Epiphany never seems to grow tired. Each year, the account of the Magi travelling from the East to find the baby Jesus evokes wonder in young and old alike. There is something enchanting about these mysterious figures. Are they philosophers, priests, astrologers, wizards, or kings? Even their number is shrouded in mystery. The Gospel is actually silent about this. Only in later tradition are they given the exotic names of Casper, Melchior and Balthasar. The whole episode reads like a mesmerizing fairytale.

By calling Epiphany a fairytale, I want to make a serious point. Usually when we call something a fairytale, we question its truth. Thus, from a secular viewpoint, Christianity is often labeled a fairytale in a negative sense. Faith is placed on a par with make-believe stories about princesses kissing frogs who turn into princes. But this does injustice to the life of faith. Also, by making fairytale a byword for untruth, it ignores their ancient wisdom rooted in folklore.

Indeed, against the context of our disenchanted technological world devoid of any meaning beyond what we impose on it, fairytales can be vehicles of re-enchantment that nourish a living communion between all things that exceeds our power. This is a view championed by people

like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis who saw fairytales as pointing to a vision of reality that finds its fulfilment in Christianity.

There are here five key elements of fairytales. The first is the otherness of their fantastical realms, populated with strange and wonderful beings. While set in worlds beyond our own they are, nevertheless, internally consistent and draw on the natural and moral character of our reality. In fact, the best fairytales help us to encounter afresh a hidden sense of otherness within our world, particularly in nature where trees, rocks, stars, animals, and people shimmer with an excess of meaning. The human creativity expressed in fairytales here opens up to the creativity at the heart of being.

Secondly, the plot of fairytales is driven not principally by human subjects but the movement and exchange of objects as magical gifts initially bestowed by mysterious helpers, be they fairies, elves, angels, or whatever. Fairy-realms are often full of ambiguity, loss, and threat. However, unlike myths that emphasize heroic individuals shaping their destiny against an impersonal tragic fate, fairytales situate humans in a world grounded in an original gift of the good, true and beautiful. This wholly positive creative gift is encountered anew whenever objects are exchanged as gifts that help forge greater communion between living things. This is, in fact, deeply sacramental and invokes Eucharistic worship in which God transforms material

objects into tokens of Christ's presence shared out for the sake of building up a communion of love.

The third element is that fairytales implicitly stress the importance of our imaginations as portals into a real realm rather than mere make-believe. Our imaginations are gateways into a cosmic dimension full of shimmering active presences that inspire us in how we creatively shape our material reality as gift.

This connects to the fourth element: magic. Compared to a dark magic which prizes power over inert matter and a will to dominate objects and persons; fairytales advocate good magic. This is tantamount to art attentive to nature's depth and each object's inexhaustible value. Such artful magic is inseparable from the gifts of fairytales that transform the world through interpersonal exchanges that seek out ever greater solidarity between all things.

Finally, there is the characteristic fairytale happy ending that arrives as a gracious moment of joy. While this does not deny real sorrow or failure, it refuses to resign itself to final defeat but points to a fundamental joy. Such joy escapes the fairytale world into the heart of reality itself. This is fulfilled in the Gospel which weds the joy of fairytale with God's joy in creating, in coming among us in the Incarnation and in the Resurrection where the powers of darkness are overcome through love.

We see these five elements played out in today's Gospel. The journey of the Magi can be seen as a fairytale account of the human quest for wisdom that involves rediscovering the enchanted nature of creation. Thus, we meet the wise men as they follow a strange star whose very liveliness suggests an angelic guide acting as God's messenger to help humankind.

Then there is how the Magi must negotiate the perilous path through the halls of power in Jerusalem. The dominating and destructive magic of Herod is here confounded by the gracious and creative magic of the reality the Magi seek. Scripture itself enters the story here as a kind of magical gift. Though held captive by Herod and his priests for their narrow purposes, scripture escapes its chains to shine as a divinely inspired gift whose words help the wise men toward Bethlehem.

The whole account is crowned by a happy ending as the wise men greet Mary and Jesus with a disproportionate sense of joy and reverence. In Jesus, God, the giver of all good things, has given himself as the gift beyond all gifts for the healing and joy of all. In Jesus, the wise men stand before the ultimate truth of fairytale made flesh in history. And they respond in true fairytale fashion by offering themselves through enigmatic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that in Christ are transformed into potent symbols of his full humanity and divinity. And then, finally, there is the intriguing way the Magi receive a warning through a dream not to return to Herod but

disappear back to their home country by another road as if they step into another dimension full of fairytale mystery.

This reading of the Gospel informs a central theme of Epiphany, namely, that in Christ the divine light of salvation shines out from Israel to reach all people. In a rebuff to the church's own history of missionary colonialism, however, a fairytale perspective emphasizes that the divine light does not override the dignity of local traditions. Rather it works in them. Indeed, the Gospel affirms how the whole cosmos is ultimately a folktale imagined by the God who comes to us locally amid the integrity of created things. God's universal epiphany shines out as profound localism. And so, epiphany announces a pluralism in which the abundance of God's life is encountered concretely in all those local stories, customs, practices and ecosystems that help sustain communion between all things. This affirms what the Magi recognised in their joy, namely, that all of nature and human society have been reordered and subjected to Christ who sets them free to serve their proper purpose: not to sure up systems of control, but to build up what is beautiful, good and true in every local community.

On this feast of Epiphany, let us reclaim our own fairytale commission as those who belong to Christ through the gifts of baptism and holy communion. We must champion in our lives all the different ways humans search for wisdom and communion amid fragility, threat, and

tragedy. In the uncertainty of our times, we must be a people who work imaginatively to re-enchant the world by respecting the beauty of the natural world and celebrating the gifts of others in our worship, creativity and engagements. Within our neighbourhoods, we must be blazing stars who join with all those seeking the common good and so sing of God's enchanting love in a way that connects to people's actual lives. In all this, we must not fear the powers of darkness. Christ, our true helper and source of all gifts, has overcome them with a joy beyond fear. Christ crucified and risen promises us all a happy ending that nothing can defeat.