

*Homily of Archbishop Leo Cushley*

Mass of Installation of the Right Reverend Stephen Robson as Bishop of Dunkeld

*St Andrew's Cathedral, Dundee, 9 January 2014*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The readings we've just heard this evening have been chosen by Bishop Robson, without change, from the feast of the Epiphany, as celebrated just the other day.

As we all know, by history and by chance the Epiphany, along with Christmas, gives the universal Church two celebrations, as it were, of the birth of our Lord that are complementary, but which each have a slightly different emphasis. In Christmas Day, on 25 December, we have the great Roman feast of the Incarnation: the Word is made flesh and lives among us. God becomes man, so that might become like God. We are created with the wonderful gift of life, a gift that is made even more wonderful in the redemption promised to us through Jesus Christ.

The Epiphany takes precisely the same idea, but then emphasises the fact of God visiting his people. God visits his people to redeem them. The world without God is a terrible, barren place: it is as empty of the knowledge of God as the wilderness surrounding the lonely ministry of John the Baptist. But in the Epiphany, God reveals himself - and he reveals himself as standing among us. Now everything changes utterly, completely, once and for all: now we may know God face to face in the person of Jesus Christ, true God and true man.

I am sure you can think of places where there is no knowledge of God or no wish to know God. There are so many places in our world today that are barren, for the lack of the knowledge of God. But we can also imagine, without much difficulty, how the knowledge of God utterly transforms individuals and peoples, lives and whole landscapes. If your life has been touched, just once, by the presence of God, you will know what I mean when I say this. Everyone touched by the presence of God, by the knowledge of God, is transformed and will never be the same again, for the good of everyone else around. This is what we witness for the very first time in our gospel

reading tonight. Jesus is recognised for the first time for who he really is - not the poor son of an uprooted and hunted family of migrants - but God visiting his people.

Writing about the Epiphany, one of the Fathers of the Church presumes that the Magi don't know about the Jewish prophecies of the Messiah; but on the other hand, they have studied creation, the stars, what is around them, and they have come independently to the conclusion that some very great event is about to occur. They realise somehow that God is about about to visit his people. Through signs - represented by the famous star - they go searching, and eventually they find Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and a more unlikely-looking representative of God's presence in the world is probably hard to come up with. But the Magi already know and understand something of God, and as a sign of their understanding of who the child is and of the momentous event before them, they place their gifts before him and "do him homage". They therefore come, with imperfect but real faith, to worship God living among us in this little child.

They also demonstrate this through their famous gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. You will know that there are several ways to interpret the three gifts, usually as an indication of who Jesus is. That's certainly the tradition in the Roman rite's prayers for the day. But I came across another interpretation recently, from none other than Gregory the Great, and I thought I would share it with you, because he sees the gifts not as a description of Christ, but as a description of our gifts and talents placed at the Lord's feet.

Gregory the Great tells his listeners that the gold represents wisdom, frankincense represents prayer, and myrrh represents the single-minded service unto death of those who seek to do God's work. So, according to Gregory, the gifts that we ought to bring and place before the Christ child are threefold: prayer, wisdom and service.

These are the three gifts that Gregory believes that we all of us ought to pray for and to cultivate; and in a very particular way, I believe that these are precisely the gifts that will be essential to Bishop Stephen as he starts the most important task of his many years of priestly service, in the pastoral leadership of you, the heirs to the ancient Church of Dunkeld.

A spirit of prayer leading to holiness;

A spirit of wisdom leading to obedience;

A spirit of service leading to joy.

This first one is a spirit of prayer. You may know that, in some eastern churches, they don't ask their married priests to become bishops. They ask monks, because the monks are celibate, perhaps, but also because they are presumed to be holier (!). But monks are also, first and foremost, men searching for God through prayer. Prayer is, or should be, the still centre of our lives and a sure point of contact with Almighty God. Only prayer can give birth to holiness, and only holiness can preach the gospel authentically, with or without words. So the first thing I would wish for Bishop Stephen is that God grant him a spirit of prayer leading to holiness, a holiness that will make his actions a living Gospel among you all.

The second gift I would ask for him is a spirit of wisdom leading to a profound and serene obedience. You may or may not be aware of it, but in accepting to be your Pastor, Bishop Stephen swears his obedience to our Holy Father, Pope Francis. This is not some empty act, some token gesture. He signs it with his hand on the gospels, we witness it, His Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio sends it back to the Holy Father. This is an expression of an essential part of his mission among you. Our Church is a great communion, a seamless tunic, woven around the Apostle Peter and his successors. Without wise leadership in communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Church would disintegrate, we would drift away from Christ our head and from the great family which is His mystical body. Each Christian is by definition part of a greater whole - the Church - even if it is sometimes difficult for us to see this with precision; but the bonds of faith and baptism are nourished through our Sunday Eucharist in communion with Christ and with the whole Church, and through communion with the Holy See and the Universal Church as a result. The obedience that flows from the gift of wisdom is often underrated or forgotten or played down, but it is the source of great serenity and peace as we discern God's will for us through the will of those placed over us. Only wisdom will show the way to obedience, and only obedience will lead to true freedom and peace. So the second gift I would ask for Bishop Stephen is the spirit of wisdom leading to obedience.

The third gift that I would ask for him is a spirit of service. Now, St Gregory expands on this gift a little bit, because he considers it not just to be a gift of service but

one of single-minded service, or “service unto death”, for those who seek to do God’s work. In other words, it is a service which is strong, complete, radical, all-encompassing. Without a spirit of service, our actions - even the good ones - drift into selfishness and self-serving, and that is poison to any clergyman or religious man or woman who has promised solemnly and publicly to give himself or herself unreservedly to God and to his kingdom. On the other hand, a true spirit of service is liberating. It frees my heart and my mind because it’s not about me any more, it’s about God and his people. It’s also joyful. Pope Francis said recently that too many people preaching the gospel “look like they just came from a funeral”. Surely that means that the joy of our service to others ought to be seen easily. Only service of God and our neighbour will give us true joy, and only joy will prove to the world that the Gospel has value and meaning. So the third gift I would ask for Bishop Stephen would be a spirit of service leading to joy.

May the Holy Spirit bestow many gifts upon Bishop Stephen in these days. But these three gifts - wisdom, prayer and service - are surely not a bad starting point for his life and ministry as he begins his mission here in the Diocese of Dunkeld. As we pray for him, let’s also remember to give thanks for the many years of wisdom, service and prayer that his predecessor, Bishop Vincent Logan, has given to you, and we ask the Lord to bless him with a happy and fruitful repose from his own labours.

And just as wise men laid their gifts at the feet of the Lord, may Bishop Robson - and all of us in our turn - learn daily to place our gifts and talents completely at the disposal of Christ our Master, so that we may one day return them to him, well used and well worn, when he comes to judge us in his glory.