

Sometime last year someone reminded me of a sermon I preached at my first midnight communion service here in Howth. I had included in my sermon a memory I had of going out sea fishing off the Antrim coast with a member of the Parish of Ahoghill. By the time we came back in, it was after dark. Looking from the boat towards the shore I was aware of a mass of lights - street lights, traffic lights, car lights, lights from houses – somewhere in the midst of them all were the lights marking the entrance into Carnlough harbour. Fortunately my friend knew this part of the Antrim coast well. He knew which lights to set his course by and before I knew it we had made our way back into the harbour.

Over the years, on different parts of our coast, people used to set false lights, with the sole purpose of drawing boats not familiar with the area onto rocks. This was with the purpose of wrecking the ships and plundering their cargoes, in the course of which the crews of these ships were frequently killed.

All this occurred to me as I reflected on the readings for Epiphany, that we read at our service this morning which contain reference to light. Light shining in darkness, nations being drawn to the light, wise men following one particular star. At our 11 o'clock service in the context of our communion service we are celebrating the sacrament of baptism. At the very end of that service, as we all prepare to depart, the following words are addressed to the child:

God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness  
and has given us a place with the saints in light.

*The newly baptized are sent out with these words:*

You have received the light of Christ;  
walk in this light all the days of your life.

Shine as a light in the world  
to the glory of God the Father

You have received the light.  
walk in this light  
Shine as a light

These are words that speak of our Christian vocation as ones baptised in the name of Christ.

We read as our Gospel reading this morning, the account given by St Matthew of the visit of Magi from the east bearing gifts, who had travelled by the light of a particular star. Anyone standing looking up at the sky on a clear starry night is only too aware of the multitude of stars. Taking the story as it stands, why that particular star?

I just want to stay with that picture of magi following a particular star along with those two other pictures; that of my friend, picking out the harbour lights from all the other lights, bringing a boat safely into harbour and that of those who set false lights to bring unwary boats onto rocks.

What is our guiding star in life? Is it solely that of self interest; be it for myself, my family or my community? Or do we look beyond that, beyond short term advantage to those more transcendent values of justice, of truth, of compassion, of mercy, of peace? I am not talking of these as theoretical concepts, as nice ideas. Rather I am looking at them as things to be expressed in the priorities we set, in the actions we take in the messy business of day to day living. In other words, how do we incarnate these gospel values, how do we put flesh on them, that they may be seen living and active in the world of today? In our behaviour towards others in our family, in our neighbourhood, in our places of recreation; in the actions we take in our homes, in our business and professional life; in the politics and politicians we support – do we look for leaders who will promote these values of justice, of truth, of integrity or ones who will just look after our own sectional self-interest?

This is where the service of Baptism, in the promises made by parents and godparents, offer a template, a guiding star for our walk of faith, for life in all the complexities and contradictions of the real world..

Do you reject the devil and all proud rebellion against God?

**I reject them.**

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

**I renounce them.**

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

**I repent of them.**

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?

**I turn to Christ.**

Do you submit to Christ as Lord?

**I submit to Christ.**

Do you come to Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life?

**I come to Christ.**

They represent for me an undertaking to set our course by the light of Christ. We will not always get it right; we will sometimes steer off course but the light is always there to guide us back. And so in our closing words to Lucille we will not only say you have received the light of Christ, we will encourage her to walk in the light of Christ.

This is where we come in; I'm speaking here not only of parents and godparents (who have a specific responsibility) but to the wider Parish community. What light will she see in our lives, as individuals, as a community? Hopefully she will see in us something of the light of Christ, something of the Gospel values of justice, of truth, of compassion, of mercy, of peace; that along with us she might shine as a light in the world in the world of today.

In the words of the blessing of this season of Epiphany:

Christ the Son be manifest to you,  
that your lives may be a light to the world