

The Epiphany Preface

'We have seen his star in the East, and come to worship him.'

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.

For today you have revealed the mystery of our salvation in Christ as a light for the nations, and, when he appeared in our mortal nature, you made us new by the glory of his immortal nature.

And so, with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your glory...

The Preface of the Mass is a porch to the Holy of Holies. At its culmination, we are transported like the prophet Isaiah into the presence of the heavenly court, of 'Angels and Archangels, Thrones and Dominions', where all the angelic hosts sing, 'Holy, holy, holy'. In older forms of the Mass, the most commonly-used Preface commemorated the central mystery of faith, the Holy Trinity itself; in the present form of the Mass, the Preface usually recalls the Paschal Mystery, Christ's death and resurrection by which we in time are granted access to the Trinity's eternal life. But some feasts have their own Prefaces, which offer us special insight into the particular, enduring significance of this or that event in the life of Christ and of the Church.

The Preface of the Epiphany highlights two features of the mystery for us. First is the universality of the salvation Christ brings. He is, as Simeon declared, a 'light for the nations', the one in whom the glory of God definitively and irreversibly bursts out beyond the bounds of Israel. The magi, we all know, were led to him by the light of a star: they discerned the significance of that light from their own traditions and learning. But, what is more impressive, when the glory of that star led them to the humble manger, the babe of Bethlehem, they recognised that *he* was the world's true Light. The star's light, the light of all their erudition, was borrowed from him; and the point of every other light is to lead back to him. Rubens' *Adoration of the Magi* depicts this very forcefully: the Christ-child is positively aglow, bathing all around him in serene illumination; the torches of the townsfolk, presumably useful on the way, pale by comparison once inside the stable.

The second feature brought out by the Preface is the *admirabile commercium*, the 'wonderful exchange' which is such a prominent feature of the prayers of Christmas: the idea that God, by taking to himself our nature, has lent us a share in *his* nature. Jesus reveals to us a hidden destiny: God did not make us to be merely human, God made humans to be divine! That mixing of natures is commemorated and effected in every celebration of the Mass, when we join our prayer to the worship of the Father by the Son-made-man: in so doing, we restore the creation to God along with us, creation represented in the bread and wine which become the material of the Eucharist. More widely, all Christian liturgy acts as a positive leaven to human culture. There is an intimate connection between 'culture' and 'cult'. God gives us the riches of liturgy and sacraments and seasons in the year to appreciate in all things the effects of his redeeming work. In turn, the liturgy re-refers human language, materiality, community, life, back to the God who is the source of all that is good, beautiful, and true, every rumour and shimmer of the divine.