Homily for the Feast of Epiphany (A)
St. John Francis Regis Chapel, Regis University
January 8th, 2017

Isaiah 60:1-6
Ephesians 3:2-6
Matthew 2:1-12

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore footed, refractory,
Lying down in the snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with the vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it all again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad for another death.

- T.S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi"

The persona of Eliot's masterpiece, the speaker of the divine dignity and the woeful contingency of creation is an old man, a magus, or wise man/magician of the ancient world. He is a man of worldly wisdom and wide experience, a man who probably spent much of his life in a king's cou1i. Surely, he knew how to act before King Herod!

He remembers and reflects on the journey of a lifetime, epitomized in his journey with the other magi to see the infant born in a stable outside Bethlehem. This is a poet and yet an Everyman, who goes to the heart of the "mystery hidden for ages," the infinite God wrapped in finite human flesh. It is the central mystery of our faith: That God is so in love with us that God would be one with us; the infinite carried by the finite; the Epiphany.

"An 'epiphany' is a discovery or an amazing insight. It just makes things clear, all of a sudden. The feast we are celebrating is about the historic evolution of God's relationship with us, at the birth of Jesus. The promise made to the people whom God called his 'chosen people' is now given, revealed, shown, made manifest to the rest of the world. The seekers, who studied the stars for an understanding of 'mysteries,' are led to the mystery of a child born in a stable. They could not have comprehended the full meaning of this discovery, nor could the child's parents have fully explained it to them. However, their presence as part of this story fulfills the promises of the prophets. God's saving presence among us would be a gift for all the nations, for everyone" (Andy Alexander, S.J., Daily Reflections, January 5, 2014). We are all the Chosen People.
It seems important to note that in Eliot's famous rendition of the Epiphany, we do not see or hear the Holy Family, not Joseph, not the Virgin who has given birth, not the child. Yet all are present by allusion, an invited imagining. The child becomes the focus of the *magus'* hope and desire - and thus ours – because the child is like us: frail and needy, easily broken, wise but too easily deceived, and given to death but in so being, bringing forth the promise and meaning of hope and eternal life.

We, too, have seen birth and death and thought they were different. And so, the *magus* becomes our eyes and ears, a messenger to us who do not see the Holy Family, do not yet see the depth of the revelation before us from all time unto this very moment. He speaks to our being ill at ease with our lack of understanding, our creaturliness. He vocalizes our restlessness and impatience with the process of life and its unending frustrations. He, like us, returns again and again to the "kingdoms" we have built ... but something is different. He knows there is more. He opens our hearts and our eyes in the moment of BIRTH.

All this was a long time ago, I remember, And I would do it all again, but set down This set down This: were we lead all that way for Birth or Death ... this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death... I should be glad for another death.

He and we cannot console ourselves any longer with distractions. This is the moment. "God's secret plan, Paul wrote, is that we are all co-heirs of God's glory in Jesus. Every mother's child bears his face. All members of his body share in his promise" (Kavanaugh, *The Word Engaged*, 14). There is no perfect understanding of this infinite love; there is only infinite longing to be one with the Lover of the universe. When we realize we have been loved infinitely, we long, like the *magus*, for a death that sheds finitude and opens eternity.

"Like sages, let us delight at seeing the star, [the Epiphany,] at entering the house, at seeing the mother. Let us do homage. Let us open the gifts of our hearts" (Kavanaugh, 14).