

Epiphany, Year C

Musical composers sometimes introduce their work with an overture, which sets the mood and introduces the main themes of their composition. A gospel prologue has much the same function. Matthew begins his account of Jesus, as do all the other gospels, with the baptism in the Jordan (Matthew chapter 3), which marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. His first two chapters, including the passage chosen for today's mass, are his overture. They set the stage for the key themes upon which Matthew wishes to focus.

It is probable that Matthew's gospel came out of the Christian community of Antioch in Syria. It was here, according to the Acts of the Apostles, that the followers of Jesus were first called 'Christians' (Acts 11:26). Jesus' first disciples, like himself, were Jews. As the community spread, however, more and more people of non-Jewish background joined the Christian community. This was notably so in Antioch. The author of Matthew's Gospel, therefore, was especially conscious of the universal ('catholic') nature of Christianity. Jesus' significance could not be confined to Judaism. The final words of his gospel are well-known: 'Go and make disciples of *all* nations ... and remember I am with you always, to the end of time' (28:19-20).

It is this theme that is introduced by Matthew in the story of the Magi. To create this simple and attractive piece of drama, Matthew draws on the poetry of Isaiah and Psalm 72, which we have just read in the First Reading and the Responsorial Psalm. The wise men from the East represent the nations of the world that already in Matthew's time had begun to find in Jesus the answer to their searching and the fulfillment of their dreams. We who gather at this Mass today are a sample of the many cultures that enrich this land. We also belong to a church that calls itself 'Catholic' because it is committed to the mission given us by Jesus to make disciples of all nations. Like the Magi, each nation has its special gift. The church invites every culture to bring all that is humanly noble in it to Christ. Consecrated in this way, we could together build a civilisation of love. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, we are called to 'harness for God the energies of love.' As Jules Chevalier, the founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, wrote: 'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth: a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy; a world which the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth'.

As Christians committed to the universality of Jesus' mission, we are committed in a special way to this 'Catholic' dream. The Patriarch of Jerusalem in the middle of the fourth century was a man called Cyril. He was present at the First Council at Constantinople, the Council that added to the creed the words which have been prayed by the Christian assembly every Sunday since: 'We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. In his catechetical instructions Cyril explains the significance of the word 'catholic': 'The Church catholic or universal gets her name from the fact that she is scattered through the whole world from one end of the earth to the other, and also because she teaches universally and without omission all the doctrines which are to be made known to humankind ... Then again because she teaches one way of worship to all people, nobles or commoners, learned or simple; finally because she universally cures and heals every sort of sin which is committed by soul and body. Moreover there is in her every kind of virtue in words and deeds and spiritual gifts of every sort ... About the same holy catholic Church Paul writes to Timothy: "That you may know how one ought to live in the household of God which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth"' (*Catechetical*

Instructions 18, 23-25).

In one sense the Church can be said to be catholic in aspiration. It will only be catholic *in fact* when every person is part of the community of Jesus' disciples and when all Christians are in communion. It is obvious that the Church is broken, and every section of the broken body is the poorer for the divisions that continue to wound us. But disciples of Jesus cannot allow themselves to forget his words: 'I pray that they may all be one'(John 17:20-21). This is especially important for a church that explicitly names itself 'Catholic', in this way proclaiming to the world that it is committed to universality. To call oneself 'Catholic' is to refuse to accept as normal that there are many Christian denominations not living in communion with each other. Catholics do not profess to be more faithful or more holy than other Christians. We do profess to be committed to the universal mission of Jesus. A truly catholic heart will never be at peace while divisions continue.

The Church of yesterday can be likened to a river barge. It was a large barge, with straight front and sides and with a flat bottom, well built for navigating a river and able to carry everything. There were churches on it and schools, presbyteries, convents and monasteries. There were tennis courts for the Catholic youth, and mother's clubs, and the children of Mary in their regalia, and the Sacred Heart sodality and the Legion of Mary. The priest was trained to pilot the barge along the river. The river had many bends, and navigation was not always easy. There were alligators and swamps, and every now and then rapids had to be negotiated. But on the whole the river was fairly predictable. The pilot could learn his job in a seminary and carry it out well if he followed the instruction book. This is a caricature, but I hope it captures some truth.

Our problem is that in our time the river has hit the sea, with obvious results for the barge. There is nothing wrong with reaching the sea: that is where rivers are meant to go. But the barge, which has done an excellent job in bringing us down the river, is not built for breaking through waves and negotiating the open sea. We experience chaos as the waves crash against the flat prow of the barge, causing it to shudder and break apart, with the loss of much that it was carrying. It is understandable that those on the barge should suffer shock and that many become desperate. Some keep trying to row back up stream, but that proves impossible. Besides it displays a lack of faith in the God of history and in the leadership of the Church that agreed that the modern world is where the church wants to be. Some have jumped over-board in one's and two's hoping to survive in small dinghies, bobbing up and down amid the waves. But dinghies are too small to carry the mission of the church, and are no better than a barge in the open sea. Others, unable to face what is happening, sit in the pilot's cabin and paint river scenes on the windows, trying to convince themselves and others that we are still in the river and that everything will be all right if everyone keeps on doing what we have been trained to do. What has to happen, of course – and no one is pretending it is easy while the waves are crashing around us – is that we need to put a keel on the barge, and re-shape its prow. We need to make institutional changes that are faithful to the direction and task that has been given us, but that can cope with the waves and take us through them to the sea. Jesus may appear to be asleep, but he is with us. He promised that he would be with us till the end of time. If we cry to him, he will inspire us, together, to refashion the craft so as to retain all that is good in her. We will be able to maintain direction and together continue our journey in a new environment, impelled by the love of Christ, directed by his Spirit towards our Father's home.

The call today to all our churches is to refashion our institutions so as to retain all that is good in them while being sensitive to the present call of Christ. Only by journeying towards the light that shines from the heart of Jesus will we be able to continue our journey in a new environment, impelled by the love of Christ, and directed by his Spirit towards our Father's home.

There are problems involved in doing this, but there are also opportunities that have never existed before. Television, travel and education are some of the factors that have made most of us turn our back on narrow nationalism or religious bigotry. We aspire to belong to a world in which we are all brothers and sisters enjoying our rich diversity, making our own contribution and welcoming the contributions which others make to the symphony of love that rises to God from this wonderful but deeply suffering creation. We recognise how artificial are the barriers created by geography and nationality and how political many of the religious divisions are that continue to wound our world.

When we accept to be called Roman Catholic this is not meant as a denominational limit to our catholicity. It is an acknowledgment of the historical fact that Peter, the leader of the Church after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Paul, the missionary of the Gentiles, both were martyred in Rome, and it was to this Church, at the administrative centre of the Roman Empire, that the various Christian communities throughout that empire looked for guidance in their struggle to remain united (see John-Paul II, *That they may be One*, 1995, n.90). From the beginning of the Church and still, the Church in Rome is a symbol of our unity. Pope Paul VI spoke of our catholicity in this way: 'When the name catholic becomes an interior reality, all egoism is overcome, all class struggle develops into full social solidarity, all nationalism is reconciled with the good of the world community, all racism is condemned, and all totalitarianism is unmasked in its inhumanity. ... A catholic heart means a heart with universal dimensions: a heart that has overcome its basic narrowness that prevents us listening to our calling towards supreme love. It means a magnanimous heart, an ecumenical heart, a heart capable of embracing the whole world.'

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. The word 'epiphany' means 'showing forth'. On this feast we focus on the universal relevance of Christ as the revelation in human form of God himself – a revelation made for the whole world. We would do well to examine our consciousness on what it really means to call ourselves catholic. Karl Rahner, whom many would regard as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, warns us against using the word 'catholic' in a sectarian way, to defend what he calls 'our cozy traditionalism and stale pseudo-orthodoxy, in fear of the mentality of modern man and woman and modern society'. He goes on to say: 'If we tacitly consent to the departure of restless, questioning people from the Church, so that we can return to our repose and orderly life and everything in the Church becomes as it was before, we are propagating, not the attitude proper to Christ's little flock, but a petty sectarian mentality. This is all the more dangerous because it shows up, not under its true name, but in an appeal to orthodoxy, church-loyalty and strict morality' (Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to come* [London: SPCK, 1974] page 29-30).

True Catholicism is faithful to the universal scope of God's love and of the Heart of Jesus reaching out, in Paul's words, to 'all that is true, all that is honourable, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is pleasing, all that is commendable, all that is excellent and worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8) in all cultures and in the mind and heart of every woman and every man

created by God. As we watch the Magi coming to Jesus and offering him their gifts, let us too come to him. It is easy, perhaps, to offer him our 'gold' – what we know to be of value in ourselves. But let us not forget to offer also our 'myrrh' – the perfumed oil that was used for burial. It reminds us of our human frailty, our weakness. This also is part of who we are and it is not a barrier to our coming to him. He welcomes our myrrh as he welcomes our gold. Finally the 'frankincense' of our prayer which lifts all that we are and all that we have up to God in prayer. As we watch the Christ child welcome the Magi and their gifts, know that he embraces us, too, and all we love and all that is good in our culture. As people who dare to call ourselves 'Catholics' let us pray with the Church the Prayer for the Fifth Sunday of Lent: 'Help us embrace the world you have given us that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life and joy of Easter.'