

The repeated phrase 'to pay homage' from our Gospel reading isn't one that's used much these days. It means to publicly show respect or honour— including to offer service to a lord or king. The astrologers from the East were on a journey not just because they were curious about the star, but because they wanted to pay homage to the child.

It's not only the wording 'pay homage' that's rare in our world now. The whole concept of offering noble people our praise and honour is not part of most of our lives. It belongs to a feudal mindset, where there's a hierarchy of who is important, you know your place on the ladder, and the people down below owe respect to the people further up. In modern, liberal, democratic societies, we consider everyone equal, and those in leadership are just doing a job. We might give them respect and trust if they work hard and seem honest, but we're unlikely to give them what we would call 'undue' honour and loyalty. On one level, I think this is a good development in creating a more equal society. But I'm curious about the side effects.

The lack of 'homage' in our culture seems partly to come from decades of thinking that says, 'I'm as good as the next person, I am entitled to follow my dream, I deserve success, and I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way.' People who are schooled in that kind of mentality see others as competitors in the great game of life. To offer praise and public honour to someone else is as good as admitting defeat – they're winning, I'm not, and I should be. When you take away the idea that some people are *born* more deserving of praise than others, then it becomes difficult to know who to praise (the smart? the gifted sports player or musician? the beautiful?) And it's hard not to feel somehow 'less' when another person is praised instead of me. The flow on effect of that is cynicism. We find reasons to undermine praise-worthy things and people, to make ourselves feel better.

All this affects our ability – as a culture – to credit the idea of God, let alone to offer ourselves to God. We successful, comfortable people don't like the idea that there's something beyond us, something 'more' than us, to whom we may owe our lives and service, or that calls for our homage. We are so hardwired to see ourselves as the centre of everything, and as deserving of praise, that giving praise to God can start to feel like it's making us smaller. Many feel that the concept of God diminishes us, and we don't like that feeling.

This is the contrast between Herod and the Magi in our Gospel today. Herod holds power, but knows that this power is limited. He wants to be absolute, and is terrified at the idea that someone or something might come along who is more powerful or important than he is. The only way to protect his position is by violence and lies. He pretends to want to know where this new king has been born so he, too, can pay homage to him, but what he really wants is to get rid of the threat.

The Magi, on the other hand are actively seeking something and someone who is greater than they are. They are wise scholars, worthy of respect in their own right, but they know that they can only be made larger and more noble by offering honour and gifts to someone else. They are not in the competition game. They have discovered the deeper wisdom, where giving and receiving flow from one another, rather than being opposed.

Rowan Williams has a beautiful meditation on this topic, by way of Mary's use of the word 'magnify':

"when we praise someone or something else we make them bigger in the sense of giving them more room: we step back, we put our preoccupations and goals and plans aside so as to let the reality of something else live in us for that moment... And so [Mary] says...that 'he that is mighty hath magnified *me*'. As she gives room to God, God makes her greater...When Mary gives room to God, God gives room to her: her humanity blossoms into its fullest glory. Learn to give God room and you realise that what has to be cleared away to make room for him isn't your real humanity but all that has stopped you being human, all that makes you less than you could be. On the far side of the terrible, forbidding, draining business of letting go of your expectations, your safety and your possessions lies more not less of life."

This is something that Herod simply cannot and will not bring himself to believe or do. He clings on to everything that makes him a lesser person, believing that he is the source of his own power. Which is why he can never pay homage to anyone or anything else – he can't make room inside himself to make anyone else bigger – he can't step back – because his sense of what makes him important is so fragile, and he needs to protect it in every moment.

Can you recognise the Herod who lives in you? The part of you that struggles to praise - to make room for God, or for others - the part of you that is terrified of disappearing if you give yourself over to God? The part of you that holds on to fearful behaviours and habits, prejudice, the need to control, the need to be thought of as always right?

The invitation in this feast of Epiphany is to seek, with the Magi, for that which calls forth your 'yes', your praise. When the Magi arrive at the place where the star had stopped they were 'overwhelmed with joy.' It's not a sighing 'oh all right then, if I have to, have it your way,' response, but the sense of having found something worthy to kneel in front of – and knowing that their kneeling makes them bigger, not smaller – and that they are participating in an act that increases dignity for themselves and the other.

The other, crucial, difference between the wise men and Herod is their ability to journey. Herod stays in one place through the whole story, calling people to him, and sending them off again. The wise men travel far across country, following the star. They didn't just see a new star, wonder what it meant, do some research, and then feel satisfied to have gained more understanding. They set themselves on pilgrimage to find for themselves what the star pointed to.

The other day, I saw a quote that said something like 'I would rather be one who regularly walks the terrain, rather than one who is good at reading maps.' I would say that most Christians today – and I include myself – are better at reading maps than walking the terrain. That is, we are well versed in Scripture and theology, and we read books about prayer, but we are less practiced at *actual* prayer and community life. But it's in the doing that we are propelled into saying 'yes' to God, and that we find opportunity to magnify God and honour others in their human dignity.

When we stay still, like Herod, we become more and more fearful and desire to protect what we currently have. But those who are willing to journey will find ourselves more and more able to pay homage to the Christ who will meet us on our way.