

## ST LEO THE GREAT; A SERMON FOR THE EPIPHANY

TRANSLATED BY RONALD TORBET, O.P.

**D**EARLY beloved, today in our sacred celebrations we are paying the tribute of honour due to the day when Christ the Saviour of the world first showed himself to the nations of the world. Today there should be born anew in our hearts the same joy that once filled the breasts of the three Wise Men when, having journeyed in accordance with the message of a new star which had become their guide, they worshipped face to face the King of heaven and earth, whose promised coming had been the object of their faith. Nor in truth is that day to be considered as belonging entirely to the past, as if the power of the mystery then revealed were something finished and done with, as if nothing reached down from then to our own times except an event belonging to the sacred history, an event which while it forms part of what we must believe, is yet to be celebrated only in memory. No: God has willed that the Epiphany of Christ be a gift that lasts and bears ever-increasing fruit, so that we can experience in our days what had but its beginning then. And so, although the gospel story we have just heard read speaks exclusively of those past days when three Wise Men, born outside the tradition of the teaching of the prophets and the witness to God of the Mosaic Law, came from the remotest corners of the East to find knowledge of the true God, nevertheless we see this same divine work being accomplished even more plainly and more abundantly in our times in the light which shines in those who have been called to the faith. Now we can see being fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaias saying, 'The Lord hath prepared his holy arm in the sight of all the Gentiles' (Isaias, 55, 10), and, 'all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God' (ibid.); and again, 'they to whom it was not told of him, have seen: and they that heard not, have beheld' (Isaias 52, 15). When then we see men wholly given over to the wisdom of this world, and far from confessing faith in Jesus Christ, being led from the depths of their errors and called to recognize the true light, without any doubt this is the work of the resplendent brightness of divine grace.

All the new light now dawning in the darkness of their souls shines forth from the rays of that same star. The minds which it has touched with its brightness, it moves in a miraculous way, and, becoming their guide, leads them to the worship of our God.

Let us now consider closely in what way those three gifts of the Wise Men are even now being offered by all men who come to Christ along the paths of faith. Shall we not say that that same offering is being repeatedly made in the hearts of all who hold the true faith? The man who acknowledges in Christ the King of all things is continually bringing forth from the treasure-house of his soul the gift of gold; myrrh is his offering who believes that the only begotten Son of God united to himself the true nature of man; and God recognizes the incense of worship in him who confesses in the Incarnate Word a majesty equal to the Father's own.

If we make these comparisons, dearly beloved, with all the seriousness they deserve, we shall find too that there is even now not lacking some one to play the part of Herod in our Epiphany story. This is none other than the devil himself. Just as once he was the secret instigator of what Herod did, so now too he is his tireless imitator. The divine calling of all the nations of the earth is for him a crucifixion, the daily destruction of his sway a torture; his grief is to see himself everywhere deserted, our true King everywhere adored. Hence he is ever at work inspiring lies, deceitful agreements, and outbreaks of persecution. Making use of those who remain his dupes, he is at the source of the smouldering jealousy of the Jews, the insidious pretences of the heretics, and the savagery that flames out among the pagans. For the invincible might of the King of ages is ever before his eyes, that King whose Death spelt the end of the power of death itself. That is why it is against the servants of the true King that he has armed himself with all his skill in doing evil, hardening the hearts of the Jews with all the pride a knowledge of their Law inspires, corrupting the heretics with the human imaginations they falsely hold to be the faith, and inciting the pagans to a rabid persecution of the Christians. But this eternal Herod's fury is already conquered and destroyed by him who is unwilling to place the crown of martyrdom beyond the reach even of children. Such unconquerable charity has he implanted in his faithful ones, that they make bold to cry out with the Apostle: 'Who will separate us from the

love of Christ? Will affliction, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? For thy sake, says the Scripture, we face death at every moment, reckoned no better than sheep marked down for slaughter. Yet in all this we are conquerors, through him who has granted us his love.' (Romans, 8, 35.)

This fortitude, dearly beloved, we believe to have been necessary not only in those times when the kings of the earth and all the secular power raged in a blood-stained orgy of irreligion against God's people, thinking it their highest claim to glory to remove the name of Christian from the earth, not knowing that God's Church finds its increase through the fury of their cruel deeds, since those who are reckoned to be lessened in number through the sufferings and death of the martyrs, are rather increased by their example. In fact the attack made by our persecutors has so far benefited our faith that even royalty now finds its highest dignity in being numbered among the members of Christ, the Lord of all the world. Nor now is their pride in their princely birth as great as their joy in their baptismal rebirth.

But although the disturbance of these earlier storms has now grown still, and, with the end of strife, a certain measure of tranquillity now holds gentle sway, we must still be alert and on our guard against the perils to which the breathing space of peace gives rise. For our adversary, foiled in open persecution, still rages now, his skill to work evil gone underground. Those whom he could not fell with external afflictions, he now aims to undermine with indulgence in forbidden pleasure. He now finds resistance to himself in the new-found faith of the princes, sees the unique Godhead of the indivisible Trinity worshipped no less promptly in their palaces than in our churches, and laments that the shedding of Christian blood is now forbidden sport. Very well then: if their death is no longer obtainable, he will attack their moral life. And so in place of the fear of proscription he causes to be lit the flame of avarice, and vitiates with greed those who stood fast before the loss of earthly goods. His evil-intent which has so long a history is thoroughly pervaded with his essential wickedness. Hence he has not cast hatred from him, but merely changed his plan. He now intends to conquer the minds of the faithful with flattery. Those who stood firm when tortured, he now rings round with the fires of evil desires. He sows discords,

kindles anger, unbridles tongues: and lest the more watchful hearts should call themselves back from his unlawful measures, he heaps up opportunities for consummating their crimes. For the fruit he aims to win from all his deceitfulness is the homage of all kinds of sin, to make up for the sacrifice of flocks and the burning of incense which are no longer performed in his worship.

You see then, dearly beloved, that our days of peace have their own dangers, and it would be foolish to feel safe in the liberty now granted to profess our faith, if we were to offer no resistance against our evil desires. The heart of a man is revealed by what he does, his conduct bears witness to his thought. For there are some who, as the Apostle says, 'profess recognition of God, but their practice contradicts it'. (Titus 1, 16.) A man is truly guilty of denial when the good that is heard from his lips finds no place in his conscience. Weak human nature all too easily slips into sin, and since there is no sin without pleasure we all too quickly acquiesce in the enticements of false delights. In the face of the lusts of the flesh we must have recourse to the bulwarks of the spirit. Let us turn to the knowledge of our God which is imprinted in our souls, and away from the evil counsels and suggestions of our Enemy. Let us find our help in the patience of God, nor find fuel for our continuance in sin in what is only a postponement of punishment. Let no sinner feel himself secure because he is not chastised. For if he lets slip past the time of repentance, he will find no place where mercy will be granted him. In the words of the prophet: 'For there is no one in death, that is mindful of thee: and who shall confess to thee in hell?' (Ps. 6, 6.) But whoever finds the work of correction difficult should take refuge in the mercy of God who is ever ready to help, and ask him himself to break the bonds of evil custom, for 'The Lord lifteth up all that fall: and setteth up all that are cast down'. (Ps 144, 14.) The prayer of him who confesses will not go unheard, for our merciful God 'will do the will of them that fear him'. (Ps. 144, 19.) He will grant what is asked, just as he will already have granted the grace to ask for it. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with the Father and the Holy Ghost for ever and ever. Amen.