

“All the nations on earth shall fall prostrate before you, O Lord.”

Today’s response to the psalm. Ref: Ps 71:11

The Three Wise Men came from the East. In fact, they travelled a considerable way. They are thought to have come from at least as far away as Babylon, a journey of around eight hundred miles. Some traditions put their place of origin as far away as India, 2,500 miles away. And at least one tradition – based on a reference in Psalm 71 – places the home of one of them in the tiny village of Tharsis in South West Spain, a journey of 3,700 miles by land. Journeying from their points of origin, perhaps they met as they circled into the north of the Holy Land and travelled south, approaching Bethlehem together. Wherever they came from, they travelled a considerable distance to pay homage to One whom they recognized as the newborn King and long-awaited Messiah.

It was said in the sermon on Christmas Day that all Holy Years begin at Christmas. Today’s feast of the Epiphany shows us one of the reasons why this is so. An essential feature of a Holy Year is pilgrimage, the undertaking of a journey in order to pay homage to God. But why should we travel to worship God when we can worship Him in the comfort and convenience of our own homes?

The Wise Men, one supposes, could simply have sung the praises of God wherever they happened to be living when they first saw the star. But Christianity is not, I’m afraid, about our personal comfort or convenience. Travelling to a particular site – such as the birth place of Christ in Bethlehem, or to Rome, the centre of the Catholic Church and home, as Pope Pius XI called it, of all the ‘treasures of sanctification’ – demonstrates for us that our religion is real; that our religion is based on actual and concrete historical events that took

place in real places at fixed points in time in the history of the human race. Our holy religion is not made up of vague notions about some energy or force up there in the sky!

So we travel to holy sites where God's hand has reached down and touched the world He created.

Second, pilgrimages are journeys of penance. It is not necessary to make the journey as deliberately uncomfortable as possible! But it is necessary that a pilgrimage is an act of penance: a gift we offer to God to help atone for our sins. On pilgrimage, we conform our hearts and minds, and indeed our bodies, to the redemptive journey made by the Son of God who came down from heaven for our sakes, who travelled around the Holy Land teaching and instructing, forgiving and healing lost souls, who then undertook the definitive journey to Calvary, and even down into hell, before rising again and ascending back to His throne in heaven. If we wish to join Him in heaven one day then it is necessary that we do as He says, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.' Walking in the footsteps of Our Lord is a critical feature of our lives as Christ's followers, so much so that Our Lord adds in the same sentence, 'for he that will save his life, shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it' (Mt 16:24-25). In other words, *not* following Christ will end in our losing our lives.

Third, going on a physical pilgrimage here on earth is a participation in the pilgrim journey of our progress from a life of sin to a life of virtue, from death to life, from earth to heaven. It is precisely by going on pilgrimage that the transformation in our souls – from the death of sin to life in God's grace – is actually accomplished, involving the sanctifying grace of the Sacraments and an active involvement in the Works of Mercy as it does.

The Three Wise Men, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – even before the Good News had been proclaimed – followed the light that shone from heaven, undertook an

arduous journey, faced threats and danger, as well as considerable discomfort and inconvenience, knelt down and fell prostrate before the living God, offered Him precious gifts, before taking back to others news of what they had seen with their own eyes.

Truly, they are models for us in our daily lives of worship, and especially in this Holy Year of Jubilee.

We may not have gold, and frankincense, and myrrh to offer the Christ Child, but we can indeed offer Him the homage of acknowledging Him to be our King, of praising Him as our God, and of bowing down in adoration before His birth in the Wood of the Manger and His death on the Wood of the Cross.

Whether you go on pilgrimage to Rome, or to one of the places in the Holy Land, or to one of the sacred places officially designated for the purpose in our own diocese – the Cathedral in Norwich and Our Lady's shrine in Walsingham – make sure you go on a pilgrimage of penance this Holy Year so that hearts that mourn at the trials and tribulations of this life may be transformed into hearts of hope that are anchored in the joy of the next.