

SERMON for Epiphany Sunday – January 5th, 2020.

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 2: 1-12.

Okay. Who was listening on Christmas morning? Who was listening to this morning's Gospel reading? How many wisemen were there? *We don't know!!*

Last week, we concentrated on all we have to be thankful for. Today, we are back to presents and have the story of some famous presents, given by some famous visitors. If we took our theology from Christmas cards and nativity plays, we would imagine that the visit of the Magi took place hard on the heels of the shepherds. That they too arrived at the stable, the cave, or where ever it was that Mary gave birth to Jesus. As I said in my Christmas sermon, while we can rejoice and admire the baby in the crib, we must, as Mary and Joseph did, move on.

Scholars believe that the events depicted in today's Gospel could have happened as much as two years after Jesus' birth, and that Joseph and Mary had by that stage moved into a house - hence Herod's instructions just after today's reading to kill all baby boys, two years and under.

Today we celebrate the Epiphany, the beginning of the season of revealing, revelation and understanding. The word *Epiphany* comes from a Greek word meaning manifestation, or revelation, or showing forth. ¹

During this season, we will hopefully come to a deeper understanding of the truth of the Christmas story: God, who has been born a human baby, and lives amongst us, has come to earth in order to show us God's true nature. Further, God calls us to faith and obedience. It is a good time to think about how best to share our faith, and to make public the declaration of the gospel. ¹

We begin Epiphany with the story of the visit of the Magi. Their faith. Their journey. Their epiphany!

Who were these Magi, these wise men from the east? Well they were most likely rich, scholarly men, probably from Persia - modern day Iran, and were possibly Zoroastrians. What we do know is that they studied the stars, they were astrologers, not like the trashy horoscope writers we know today as astrologers, their science back then was serious and respected. In their work, their studies, they believed they read the signs which indicated the birth of someone significant. So significant that they were prepared to travel into the unknown to discover what they could find.

It is interesting to think that Matthew, who's Gospel is the most Jewish of the four gospels, has a nativity story all about visitors from another place, 'wise men' who come from the east. These visitors to the young Jesus were not born and bred within the traditions and beliefs of Israel. They do not form part of the 'chosen people', but they come to render homage to a new-born King. Following the indications of a star, which they read as the sign marking the birth of a King, they come to the right place: Jerusalem! In the Holy City, and in the Holy Scriptures of the Chosen People the truth will be found. Indeed, they are told the correct answer: the Scriptures have foretold that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. ²

Filled with delight as they follow the star, the wise men find the child in Bethlehem, fall to their knees and offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - symbols, we are told, of

Jesus being born to be a king - unto death. Finally, they humbly and obediently respond to the Lord's warning about Herod which they receive in a dream, and 'return to their own country by a different way'. They might not belong to a people 'chosen' by history or culture, but they were 'chosen' by God from the Gentile world, and they came in faith and love. ²

Let's just have a quick look at those gifts which they bring. Tradition tells us that they had special significance, that gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh signifying the suffering which Jesus would know.

What do we do with gold? We can make jewellery from it, and it can be used instead of money. Everyone thinks that it is precious, that is why people thought it was meant to show that Jesus would grow up to be a king.

Frankincense comes from the sap of a tree and is dried out and burnt as incense, especially during religious services. It was thought to be sacred, used for holy purposes and helped to improve our connection with God, and make our prayers more effective. That is why people thought that it was meant to show that Jesus would be a priest. ³

Then there is myrrh, it also comes from the sap of a tree and could be dried and burnt as incense, and thought to develop spiritual awareness, but it was also used on dead bodies, for embalming. Because of myrrh's use with the dead, people made the connection that death brought suffering, they decided that Jesus had been given myrrh because it signified that he would suffer. ³

But it is interesting that frankincense and myrrh were also used for healing, they were kind of like medicines and so maybe that pointed to the fact that Jesus would grow up to be a healer and make people well.

In many ways, the gold was like giving Jesus' parents money for him, and the other two were gifts to keep him healthy as he grew up, these items could have been things they had in the bags, as they travelled so maybe the presents he received weren't so strange after all.

What do we bring to God? What do we bring each Sunday as we come to worship? What is it that we have to offer?

In the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah:

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but **to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?** ⁴

Our gospel story of a joyful and positive response from the wise men is matched by the opposite reaction from those who should have known better. These wise men, come to Jerusalem, the sacred city of God, and ask for further knowledge about the new-born King. Indeed, the chief priests and the scribes are able to provide the information: Bethlehem! They know the answers from the sacred tradition, but they do not have the openness to the revelation of God present in this child born to be king. Herod and the whole of Jerusalem are perturbed. This consternation will eventually lead to the slaying of the Innocents, the

boys two years of age and under. There are dark hints of what might soon happen as Herod interrogates the Magi 'privately' so that he too may offer homage! ²

While today the Church proclaims the revelation of God to the whole world - in the figures of the wise men from the east - it also warns all who have been blessed with the 'knowledge' of the truth. The Magi have no special privileges; they simply respond to the sign which comes from God. The Chosen People in their Holy City with their Holy Scriptures are threatened when their 'religion' is disturbed by Jesus. We 'chosen ones', with our Anglican history and culture, can also miss the wonder of God's presence in our lives, because it challenges our own tidy schemes too radically. The life and teaching of Jesus will always threaten our comfort and call us to great love. It is one thing to say that we have our answers in the person and teaching of Jesus; it is another to live lives which show such answers to be true. ²

So, as we worship God this day, as we kneel and worship with those visiting wise men, what is it that we offer to Jesus? What is the gift we bring?

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
5 January 2020.

REFERENCES:

A re-work of EpDayA13

1. *Epiphany* in *Sacred: a journey through the Church Year* by Brett Webb-Mitchell & Diane Archer.
2. *This is the Gospel of the Lord* by Francis J. Moloney, pp. 80-81.
3. *Journey with the Magi* by Keith Duke (c) 2004 published by Kevin Mayhew Ltd, Suffolk, UK. pp. 23-24
4. Micah 6: 6-8.