

SERMON for Epiphany - January 3rd, 2021.

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

This morning we are celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord which is normally celebrated on January 6th each year, 12 days after Christmas. While we are a little early this year, I remind you that all Christmas decorations are due to come down on Wednesday!

But Epiphany means more than the day to pull our Christmas decorations down.

The word, Epiphany, means *manifestation*, or *revelation*, or *showing forth*. In the Western Church, it is the day that we remember the story of the Wise Men - the first Gentile visitors to whom He was made known. Through their story, we remember that Jesus has come into the world to be made known to everyone - Jew and Gentile,¹ and is the gift of salvation for all nations. Sharing the good news of Jesus with all people is an important focus during Epiphany.²

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the concept of 'showing forth' is made even more explicit by moving the story forwards to the baptism of Jesus - the event through which God makes known precisely who Jesus is, by declaring aloud: "This is my Son ..."¹ We will be celebrating the Baptism of the Lord next Sunday, and I am hoping we might all renew the promises which were made at our baptism.

One of the early themes of St John's Gospel is the coming of the light:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." [John 1: 3b-5]

and this echoes one of the central themes of Epiphany - God's light overcoming the darkness of sin and evil. Symbols of light, stars, crowns and gifts are used at this time of the year.² As a reminder this year we will be keeping our star up during the season of Epiphany – a symbol of our calling to be bearers of light to the world.

Our gospel reading this morning tells us the story of the wise men (or as the Good News Bible puts it "men who studied the stars") who had travelled from the east in search of one who had been born to be King of the Jews for:

We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him. [Matthew 2: 2b]

When we revisit the reading from Isaiah in light of Matthew's story, we see Isaiah's prophecy tells us of the coming of the light and how nations will be drawn to that light.

"They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." [Isaiah 60: 6]

So, who were these visitors from "the east"?

Our Christmas carols talk of three kings from the orient but Matthew, whose gospel contains the only account of this story, doesn't mention how many there were. That is why this year we have put out more than the traditional three gifts with our nativity scene. It is thought that the number three for the wisemen came from the three gifts which were recorded as presented to the young family.

These men were likely to have been scholars, possibly priests, and studied the stars in what we would acknowledge today in both the fields of astronomy and astrology. Matthew calls the travellers *Magoi* or Magi as we call them today. The Magi were from Persia and would have been followers of the prophet and teacher Zoroaster from that region. However, Matthew just says they came from the east, but does not say exactly from where - we are left to presume that it is likely to have been from outside the Roman Empire.

Another interesting fact is that they obviously travelled by night, seeing that they were guided by the star. Daytime travel was usually reserved for roads which travellers knew well and

so in unfamiliar territory caravans would travel at night so they could use the stars for navigation.

It is generally accepted that the phenomenon which the Magi saw in the sky took place in 7 BCE and was the star Sirius in conjunction with the planets Jupiter and Saturn. Who saw the planets Jupiter and Saturn a couple of weeks ago? I was super excited and dragged Chris out to the lookout at Ocean Beach one evening, but it was a little disappointing, compared to some of the celestial sights we have seen! This conjunction comes around approximately every 400 years or so. Some writers have suggested that Halley's Comet was involved, but scholars have calculated that would have been seen possibly 5 years earlier.³ Whatever it was, it must have been quite a sight and caused some consternation amongst those who saw it.

When we consider the gifts that these travellers brought with them, gold, frankincense and myrrh, the traditional view has tended to be that these were prophetic gifts brought to the young child.

Gold for a king - the child born to be King of the Jews.

Frankincense for a priest - Jesus, being our great high priest.

Myrrh for suffering and death - indicating that his life would end in suffering and a painful death.

Of course, we will never know, but the explanation may have been a lot simpler.

Traditionally travellers carried gold as a form of currency which was accepted in all parts of the known world - that would make sense to us even today - countries hoard and trade in gold. So, in many respects, it would be like giving the child or parents a gift of money - again not so unusual.

The frankincense and myrrh are more unfamiliar to us and our culture. Frankincense has always been regarded as sacred and when burnt, it is supposed to help our connection with God and therefore the effectiveness of prayer. Myrrh is also used as incense to develop spiritual awareness, but it is also used for embalming.

What is not so well known is that both also have great healing properties for a huge list of ailments from headaches to snake bites, cancer, leprosy and asthma to all kinds of inflammations, and particularly with myrrh, it was also used as a general antiseptic.

So there were practical reasons why the Magi would have been carrying these "gifts" as they journeyed. They were everyday necessities for their lives, particularly in prayer and healing. Perhaps rather than being prophetic in our traditional understanding, they were rather acknowledging Jesus' future ministry, which would in many ways be a mirror of their own, and so they shared what they carried with them.³

They were drawn by the belief that they were to witness an event of cosmic consequences. Something that would change the world for ever.

As Christians, we consider that Jesus did turn the world upside down. That he brought about a new covenant with God. Referring to it as the "new covenant" gives the impression that all others have been superseded. Some years ago, I came across an article which looked at Christian / Jewish relationships and quoted Rabbi Irving Greenberg of New York talking rather of a "newer" covenant, explaining why God might have needed such an offshoot (ie Christianity).

"It was a way of extending to all nations the original covenant made with Abraham." he said.⁴

When God made his covenant with Abraham it was so that his chosen people would be a light and a blessing to all nations. Over the centuries they failed in this, becoming exclusive

and excluding. With the birth of Jesus all this was to change. With the birth of **this** life was to come light and hope and freedom from sin and blessing for all nations.

This is to what the Magi were drawn. This is what they came to witness.

And now “every Gentile in all the world is freely admitted, invited, pressed, urged to accept the blessed grace of God in Christ, and by faith and baptism, to become an heir in Christ of His everlasting Kingdom. ... for us, like many others around the world for two thousand years, we have lived under the sunshine of that Light, the morning star which we celebrate in the Festival of Epiphany”.⁵

During the season of Epiphany, the star, which lead us to the manger on Christmas morning, which has led us with the wisemen, this Epiphany, to the Christ-child, will journey through this season of revelation and enlightenment in the hope that we will be empowered to bear witness to the light.

That light which shines in the darkness and the darkness did not, has not and will not overcome it.

Light has come into the world and has been made known to us. How does that impact our lives? How will we share with others this good news?

Revd Sally Buckley
3 January 2021

REFERENCES:

1. Tim Eady; *A Brighstone Book of Seasons*; Esme Books, Brighstone, Isle of Wight; © 2004.
2. Brett Webb-Mitchell & Diane Archer; *Sacred Seasons - A Journey through the Church Year*; The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland; © 2002.
3. Keith Duke; *Journeying with the Magi - an Advent course in the Celtic tradition*; Kevin Mayhew Ltd, Suffolk, UK; © 2004.
4. Rabbi Greenberg quoted by Chris McGillion; *It's time to settle some differences*
5. Bishop George Moberly as quoted in Tim Eady's book [1] as above.