

Sermon for Epiphany at Holy Trinity Geneva on 5 January 2025

Texts: Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

The Epiphany

Have you ever seen or experienced something and not realised its implications at the time, only later glimpsing its significance? For example, I remember many years ago, being on a camping holiday in Scotland and starting each morning by being sick. For three days, I blamed it on our rudimentary cooking arrangements and was convinced I had food poisoning. Only gradually did it dawn on me that I wasn't ill at all but pregnant with our first child. It was certainly an Epiphany moment!

The Feast of the Epiphany which we are celebrating today (one day early) is like this. The word 'Epiphany' in Greek literally means "a shining forth" - a time of sudden revelation, and this is indeed what this feast is about.

For the Feast of the Epiphany, which has been celebrated first in the Eastern Church and slightly later in the Western Church since the 4th century, is all about revelation. It is a revelation to us and to the world about what the incarnation of Jesus, of God becoming human for our sakes, really means. Today, a great light is being shone for us into the mystery of the incarnation and we are being invited to follow that light, wherever it may lead.

Paradoxically, it is through the strange and unfamiliar, that we are led into the heart of the incarnation. For the Feast of the Epiphany is all about the encounter between the strangers who come from afar and a baby lying in a manger, which leads to this eureka moment of revelation of the significance of this for all humankind.

St Matthew tells us that the wise men came from the East to seek the child who had been born king of the Jews. From his description we can conclude that they were educated men, trained in astronomy and astrology, able to read and interpret the significance of what they saw in the skies above them. Like those living in Palestine and much of the Middle East at that time, they believed that there was a direct correlation between what happened on earth and in the skies and that a significant event here on earth would be reflected in the stars.

They come to Jerusalem, the centre of both political and religious power, and from there, make their enquiries – "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?". It is the logical place for them to seek – for surely this child with such a destiny on his head, will be born in this place of power.

Their presence and questioning put deep fear both into the heart of King Herod and also, those in power in Jerusalem. Herod knew all too well, the fragility of his grip on power- dependent as he was on his Roman bosses and knowing that they could depose him any time they wished. The last thing on earth he needed was potential usurper to his throne, even if that usurper was currently a tiny child.

And for those in power in Jerusalem, the question of the wise men, the magi, was also threatening. For their power lay with the status quo worked out with King Herod and the Romans. There was too much at stake for them here and so they too,

connive, with the cunning of the King, to seek to nip this pretender to the throne in the bud.

And who knows. Perhaps, all things being equal, the wise men would have returned, as bidden by the King and let him know where the child was as he had requested. But their moment of encounter with the newborn Jesus and subsequent divine warning in a dream were to change all that.

As they depart from King Herod, they follow once more the star which had led them to this land. We are told by St Matthew that when they realise that the star has stopped directly over a dwelling ahead of them, they were filled with joy. They go in, see Jesus with his mother and immediately kneel down and pay him homage.

They then offer their gifts. Now these gifts are profoundly important in two ways. First of all, for they represent a letting go by the Magi of their claims to knowledge, power and control. For the Magi were what we might call 'spiritual experts' who through their skills and knowledge, offered people some sense of control over their own destinies. If we thought about them in secular terms today, we might compare them to senior consultants from one of the big, international legal or financial firms. High-earning specialists who are able to offer people, for a price, a means to negotiate the minefield of political, financial and social instability in order to give them some sense of control and power amidst the uncertainty of our lives.

For the Magi, gold, frankincense and myrrh represented the key tools of their trade, just as for our 21st consultants, their political and financial models and forecasts help underpin the guidance they give to clients. Gold talismans, frankincense to scent their rituals (fortunately in their case, without setting off the fire alarm!) and myrrh to help make magic ointments

Yet as they kneel before the child lying in the manger, they see in a moment of revelation (an 'Epiphany') that these are of no use for their lives. For before them, they witness God, as pure, limitless, love, revealed in a helpless baby. They see the Creator of the world, of all that has been, is and will be, before them, sharing in our human flesh and weakness, yet offering us salvation. And they glimpse in that moment of revelation, that the salvation which this tiny baby offers is for *all* humanity.

So in a sense, the Magi's offering of their gifts is an act of acknowledging this. They let go of our human desire to control and direct things, recognising in Jesus, a very different way of ruling through self-giving love.

But there is also a second way in which their gifts are important. For they are an act of recognition by the Magi that Jesus is the true King, not just of Palestine, but of all the world. Their gifts point not only to his kingship but to the manner of that kingship, marked by holiness and sacrifice.

The Magi then return to their country, heeding the divine warning, "by another road". T.S.Eliot in his poem 'The Journey of the Magi', imagines their pain as they return home. That which, before their departure, has been assured and taken for granted, was suddenly turned upside down. They see, with a terrible clarity, the falsehood of the gods to which they people cling; the hollowness of human and religious leaders'

claim to power. They realise that they are called to be bearers of the light, of the message of hope which the incarnation of Jesus brings, but also its challenges.

The Epiphany confronts us too, as we come face to face today with the God of all creation, who has come into our world, sharing utterly in our humanity, to save us. As we with the Magi, enter the place where the newborn Jesus lies with his mother Mary, we too are called to lay down our certainties – all those things which lead us to believe that we are in control; that it is our world rather than God's world. In our case, it is not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but perhaps the false security and temptations to power which our iPhone, credit cards and diaries give us.

We are called too to lay down our cynicism, our hardness of heart, our reluctance to believe that anything can be different in our lives and in the world, in the face of God's incarnate love.

For as we glimpse, as the Magi did, the unimaginable 'Epiphany' of God made flesh, at our level in the manger, we suddenly see what it means for "God to be with us". Not ruling from on high, as Herod, Pilate and Caesar longed to do, but ruling beside us, linked to our humanity and linked through the animals to all creation.

We also glimpse at the Epiphany that as God comes amongst us and dwells with us, what it means for God to embrace totally our humanity. For God literally comes to our level and this day we remember not just the best of our humanity but the times when we and others are at our very worst – when our lust for power, our selfishness and our blindness to the needs of others, leads us to acts and to tolerate political and social systems of unbelievable cruelty and oppression.

Today – in this Feast of the Epiphany, God reveals to us in his human frailty, the immense potential He offers each one of us, through His incarnation, to be part of changing the world for good. To be light-bearers of the hope He brings and to show, through our words and actions, what this can mean in practice.

So at the start of this New Year, may we lay down before God, all that leads us to act in inhuman ways, and ask Him instead to offer us a share in His heart of love and humility., May we offer to God, our commitment to follow Him in the ways He is calling us this year and like the Magi, to be 'light-bearers' to others. May we also have the courage of the Magi to be willing to take the new roads which God may be asking us to journey, trusting in God's desire to lead us to the place where we can truly bear witness to Him.

What is true for us, is also true for us as a church. Today we celebrate that the light, hope and salvation which Christ brings is for every person on Earth. St Paul reminds us today in his Letter to the Ephesians that the Church has a vital role in making this truth visible. We do this, not through our words but by living it out in practice in the inclusivity of our life together, our worship and our love and care that we show both to each other and to all in our community. Let's reflect today how we can, together, make this a reality in the year that lies ahead. **Amen**

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