

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY | 08.01.2023

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 1-12; St Matthew 2: 1-12

Those of us who have been in the Church for years have used the word Epiphany - the coming of the Three Kings to the infant Jesus in the stable - in our stride. We routinely cope with these strange terms: Epiphany, Advent, Lent, Transfiguration, Annunciation, Trinity, as if they were almost self-explanatory – which of course is ridiculous: they are nothing of the sort. Those of us ‘in the know’ are really geeks with our own special language. Is it any wonder that it takes newcomers a very long time to prise their way into all this stuff!

Worse: if you were reading any of the Gospels apart from Matthew, you would find that this visit of the Three Kings doesn't appear in Mark, Luke or John at all. It is only in this first of the three sets of readings, Year A, the ones we are using now – the one devoted to St Matthew's Gospel - that we get this story in full at all. Just because the Three Kings are on all those Christmas cards doesn't mean it is a big story in the New Testament!

But somehow Christmas would seem incomplete without this Twelfth Night visit – and the word Epiphany itself, meaning revelation or appearance – does have some useful things to teach us. And that is before we have taken on board the fact that, for the very first time, it is non-Jews who are being celebrated. Usually non-Jews or Gentiles are the bad guys, time and again trying to wipe out God's chosen people. Here St Matthew wants to show that they are the key to what God had in mind all along.

So this word epiphany – which is often used by non-Church people to mean the moment when the penny drops – takes us to a moment in history when three astrologers, three ‘creatives’ with a yearning to find answers to questions posed by a moving constellation in the sky, throw caution to the wind and travel something like 800 miles from their base in Ur, first north and then westwards through what we now think of as Iraq and Syria, until they reach the Mediterranean, before dropping south towards Bethlehem in search of the King of the Jews.

And in making this great journey, this great pilgrimage, they are literally as well as metaphorically ‘gaining knowledge’. They started off knowing nothing – and in the course of their trip they gain experience and knowledge and wisdom. They prove that by the careful way they handle King Herod, the wily political fox who they outsmart by making promises to tell him where the child is, and then realizing via a dream that that wasn't probably the best thing to do in the circumstances.

But these travellers are more than just enquirers or investigative journalists. St Matthew writes them up as examples of what happens when God comes into our lives. We can't shake off the unsettling feeling that comes from having had a sense of his presence in our lives. We can't just go back to the day job as if nothing had happened. The Three Kings are examples of that restlessness – the inability to eat or sleep until the 'God-thing' has been tested and explored. When a couple came into Church this week and asked how I could prove that God existed, this was precisely where I began. God makes a move and, as for St Augustine, *our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him*. And what we so often find is that restlessness provides its own energy. We are given what it takes to see where the questions lead.

It might not be quite as exotic as the journey of the Kings; it might only take us to a book, or to our local Church, or to some times of reflection and prayer or the seeking out of someone to talk these things out with. But moving from where we were to where we need to be is surely what Epiphany is all about.

And when we have discovered Jesus, met with him and listened to what he has to say, we are likely to find that the gifts the three Magi brought are the kinds of things we bring too. They won't be gold, frankincense and myrrh exactly but they will be on the same kinds of lines.

For what does gold represents is surely effort, time as well as money. It is about priorities. You can do what you like to gold but it will still be gold in the end. It won't degrade into something less good. Gold is what is truly ourselves and if we are giving that, it is the best we have to offer. Gold is real effort; gold is precious time, unselfish and transparent love. Gold costs.

Strangely frankincense in the ancient world was four times more expensive! And symbolically that makes sense because we are more familiar with material gold than we are with making time for prayer to a God we cannot see. Worship, giving God his worth; praying in good times and in not such good times, is not easy – and yet without it there can be no relationship with this God of the journey. It is all words and show. *Be still and know that I am God* is not an optional extra when all else fails: it lies at the heart of faith.

And myrrh – the perfume used to dress the body of the dead? What kind of a gift is that? Except that it represents something absolutely fundamental. Do you remember the story of Ruth from the Old Testament? Two widowed women are far from home and are unsure what to do next. And in support Ruth says to Naomi: *where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people...*

This is deeper than just being a travelling companion in search of the truth. It is even deeper than setting time aside for prayer, time with God. This journey was the beginning of a commitment to follow Jesus wherever he led. And we know that meant the Cross but also the Resurrection. The myrrh used for burial was as close as they could get to the words of St Ignatius:

**Teach me, Lord, to be generous;
to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for reward
save that of knowing I am doing your will.**

For that is what filled the minds of the three Wise Men as they began the long journey home. Yes, Bethlehem is where the star had led them but their quest was not fulfilled by just being there - or even from meeting Jesus himself.

What they discovered was their 'epiphany': that there was something far greater to life than they had ever realized. And of course what they came away with was far greater than the gifts - the gold, frankincense and myrrh - that they had brought with them in the first place.

By tradition we give names to the three wise men, Melchor, Casper and Balthasar. We call them kings and we often see them, sitting on camels, as they cross the desert lands. Perhaps today it is time to focus on a simpler truth: that these Gentiles were also included in the way of salvation and given the opportunity to find a new way of living. In our diverse and plural culture, what an important message to hear: God is calling people from every language and tribe and nation into his friendship. Which makes me especially happy as I look at the backgrounds of our six confirmation candidates this year who come from Australia, France, Iran, Jamaica, Tanzania as well as from the UK!

Indeed we are all being invited to take part in this great journey – albeit without the camels!