

Epiphany 2019

Matthew 2: 1-12

The feast of Epiphany, to western Christians like us, marks the fulfilment of the birth of Jesus. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition it is seen as more important than Christmas day and in the Orthodox tradition, the Birth of Jesus is celebrated at this time.

The holy child was born in a world that was in turmoil. The introduction of a new taxation system had necessitated the heavily pregnant Mary to undertake a seventy mile journey with her reluctant husband Joseph. The child was born in a stable and laid in a manger, through the generosity of a stranger. The initial joy and flurry of activity with angels and shepherds visiting had finished. The reality of Herod's paranoia was becoming evident and the flight into Egypt as refugees from slaughter and persecution was imminent.

Then comes the high point of the story and the next chapter begins to unfold as the Magi appear. The snorting of camels in the manger scene was bringing a new perspective to the story. No wonder Mary pondered these things in her heart as the gospel tells us. The Magi, the kings from the East brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. As David Bryant once put it,

*"Then comes the snorting of camels, a babble of foreign language, the stirring of dust outside and a glimpse of crowns. In an instant the bleak barn is transformed and enriched. Gold shimmers among the heaps of manure, the foetid air is rich with clouds of frankincense and the poverty and pain dwindles under the holistic, healing influences of the priceless myrrh".*

Here is the fulfilment of the prophet Isaiah about the birth place of the Messiah and here was the evidence that the birth of Jesus transcended a purely Jewish event to proclaim that this was indeed the birth of a King who would indeed rule the world. The homage of the Magi expresses the idea that foreign lands, but also pagan religions should be seen as subordinate to Christ.

The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Saviour of the world. In the Magi, representatives of the neighbouring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation.

The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations.

Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world only by turning towards the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament.

The Epiphany shows that “the full number of the nations” now takes its “place in the family of the patriarchs, the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled and God has revealed himself fully to all mankind. The coming of the Magi to the manger also reveals to us that suffering would be part of the whole story and that suffering would involve this new born child throughout his life in order that his full glory may be revealed.

Paul, in the epistle, was one of the very early Christian leaders to see that the scope of God's message was to the whole world and was not just restricted to the bounds of ethnic Israel. It is hard for us to realise that this was quite a revolutionary thought for the early church. It was as great a shift of perception as great as the change from belief in a flat earth to belief in a round earth. The Christian message is for all mankind and not just for those of a Jewish heritage.

The Magi were the first to herald this view and that is why we mark their visit to the stable to pay homage to the King. In the coming weeks we will see how the Epiphany stories unfold as we come to the end of the Christmas and Epiphany season at Candlemass, where we begin our journey towards Lent. The Christmas decorations may have been removed but the crypt scene remains until Candlemass to remind us of the way in which the story of Jesus and his teachings have transformed the world.

The star that guided the magi can be seen as the light that guided them to their discovery of faith. The words of one of the collects for today sum it up very nicely,

“Creator of the heavens, who led the Magi by a star to worship the Christ child; guide and sustain us, that we may find our journey's end in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

So what does the story of the Magi tells us today in St Mary's?

I hope that, like the manger scene when the Magi arrived, that there will be the same transforming effect. Not too sure about the snorting of camels, I would welcome the babble of foreign languages, but I do look forward to the transforming influences of the gifts that God has given us, and will continue to bring us like the Magi brought to the manger.

Those gifts will be our new hall has enabled us to undertake, from which we are growing our church here in Stoke D'Abernon. I am talking about the growing numbers that are coming to church regularly. I am talking about the re-birth of our Family Service, with the enthusiastic team that are bringing that ministry in our church to life. I am talking about the outreach of our parish lunch which is an occasion to welcome new comers into our congregation. I am talking about the ministry of welcome we need to expand as we welcome the growing numbers of couples coming to St Mary's to get married with the hope that some of them will find their spiritual home with us. I am talking about the increasing numbers of enquiries about baptism and the adults that have expressed a desire to be confirmed. I am talking about the Mothers and Others group that meets in the Hall every Thursday morning, and so I could go on.

I hope that each and every one of us will thank God for the many gifts that we, like the Christ child at the stable receive, unexpectedly and that we will rise to the challenge that the Epiphany story throws out to us all.

Amen.