

Sermon for 8th January 2023 – Epiphany of our Lord

Preached at St Michael the Archangel Smarden

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Today the Church celebrates the festival known as the Epiphany, which comes twelve days after Christmas. Epiphany is from an old Greek word meaning ‘appearance’, and it’s the sort of word they would have used in the time of Jesus to describe the presentation of a new royal child to the people. So, when we see a modern royal family showing off a new-born son or daughter to the media, that’s literally an Epiphany moment.

Originally, in the Church, this feast referred to the presentation or appearance of Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem – a ceremony Christians have replaced with Christening – but in later centuries Epiphany came to refer more to the visit of the wise men, magi, or three kings, as they followed the star to Bethlehem and brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the child in the manger.

Now, most of us are probably in the process of taking down our Christmas decorations, if we haven’t already done so; but according to tradition, the wise men have only just arrived. It perhaps feels like someone arriving at a party just as everyone else is grabbing their coat and saying goodnight.

In some parts of the world, Epiphany is much more important than Christmas, and is the day when everyone gives and receives presents, because of course Jesus didn’t get any presents until the three kings arrived with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

So, who are these three kings, and why have they come to visit Jesus? The bible doesn’t actually tell us there are three, and doesn’t tell us they’re kings, but describes them as wise men or magi, foreigners from an entirely different place, religion and culture. The idea that they’re kings comes mostly from our earlier

Old Testament reading, in which the prophet Isaiah foretells that kings will be drawn to come bearing gifts to a new child, a new light in Israel, and this is also where we get the idea that they come on camels carrying gold and frankincense.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh – three strange gifts for a baby. The gold I'm sure was well-needed and well-received. I once saw a cartoon that had the three kings whispering together and saying "we'll just tell them the gold is from all of us". And I'm sure it was handy for the journey the family were about to be forced to make to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt to kill the child.

If gold is a worthy gift for a king, then frankincense goes one step further and symbolises divinity. Burning incense has long represented the prayers of the people going up to God. And myrrh, the only gift not mentioned by Isaiah, is a perfume for burial; again, a very strange gift for a child, but taken by Christians to be a foreshadowing of Jesus dying on the cross.

Three gifts then, and this is how we come to assume there are three kings or wise men, since nothing in the bible tells us so. Much later tradition gave them names – Casper who brings frankincense, Melchior who brings gold, and Balthazar who brings myrrh.

In any case, three is always a good number for Christians. We worship the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we baptise in the name of these three as well.

So much for the strange traditions of Epiphany, but what does it all mean? Why is it a story that's even in the bible? It only appears in one of the four gospels – in Matthew. Luke's gospel has the shepherds and choirs of angels but no wise men, Matthew has the wise men but no shepherds or angels. If we want to understand why, we must look a little deeper.

Luke's gospel always tries to emphasise that the poor and social outcasts are welcome at the heart of the story of Jesus. The shepherds represent this group,

the people who slept in the fields with animals, considered unclean and unwelcome by the elite.

Matthew's gospel on the other hand is mostly written to the Jewish people of the first century, to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah that they were expecting. This is why he's always quoting from prophets such as Isaiah.

The story of the wise men or kings bringing gifts is clear evidence in his view that Jesus is that new light that would change everything. It's evidence that Jesus would not just be a light for the Jewish people but for all people, who would recognise something special and holy in Jesus and be drawn to him, crossing religious, ethnic and cultural boundaries to do so.

Clearly the wise men recognised something important in this young child. We can probably assume they didn't expect to find the new royal child in a stable, or even in a poor house in Bethlehem. They did after all go first to Herod's royal palace. Only later did they follow the star to Bethlehem. To their credit, they didn't immediately turn around and go home when they realised where the star was directing them. They trusted this divine revelation – their version of google maps perhaps – and having found the child, the first thing they do is not hand over their gifts like rulers greeting an equal, but they bow down and pay homage to Jesus. For this reason, many have said that the wise men brought *four* gifts, not three, and offering their allegiance to Jesus was by far the most important.

You can imagine what this symbolism says to the Jewish people hearing this gospel account in the first century: foreign leaders come and bow down to this holy child, the Son of God, and offer him their allegiance, but our own leader, King Herod, tries to kill him, because he's afraid for his own power. The message is obvious. Do not be like Herod, a power-hungry liar! He is not your friend.

Now, the wise men start to fade from the story at this point. They are warned in a dream about Herod's bad faith and so they sneak home by another road and

are lost to history. But I often wonder what the rest of their lives were like after this experience. What did they talk about on the way home? How were they changed as they brought the experience back with them into their ordinary lives? They famously brought gifts to Jesus, but what gift did Jesus give them to return home with?

Coming to church is in part intended to mirror this divine encounter. We come bearing gifts, to worship a king, but the point of it all is our own transformation – a radical shift in our understanding of our place in the world, a deepening of our belonging, and a forgetfulness of ourselves as we gaze with holy wonder on the divine love made visible in Jesus.

Some wise scholar pointed out that the star also fades from the story at this point. It has guided the three kings to Jesus, but then they didn't need it any more. Perhaps, suggests the wise scholar, this is because until you encounter God's love for yourself, you always need something external to guide you on your way, but once you see the divine revelation, then you do not need the star, because the light has gone from being outside you, to being within your own heart.

So, when each year we follow the Epiphany star to Jesus and behold the Messiah, and after we have been overjoyed with the Christmas message of goodwill to all, have bowed down and humbled our hearts and worshipped and offered our own gifts to the child, perhaps we too will leave the stable with a heart strangely warmed, and a new enlightened perspective, to take back into our own lives.

Our hearts are enflamed with love because we see in the life and death of Jesus the love God has for us, and we are drawn to him. For Christians, every Sunday can be an Epiphany, in which we journey here seeking God, and we are changed by the experience because we can never forget what we have seen and heard.