

Epiphany

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney on the Feast of the Epiphany, Tuesday 6th January 2009 at St Peter's Wolvercote.

The Gospel

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the **The** Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2.1-12)*

Today is the feast of the Epiphany. Strictly speaking, though, the whole Bible – both Old and New Testaments – is a series of 'feasts of Epiphanies'. For Epiphany means manifestation, and the Bible is the book of manifestations of God to his people. In it are stories of many glimpses which God has given to his people throughout the ages that tell, each time, a little more of his nature and purposes.

The greatest epiphany, or manifestation of God, is undoubtedly the Incarnation: God himself coming right into the world in human form – not glimpses of him through the Prophets or through events, but God with us, God coming to us in person.

But the Epiphany we celebrate tonight – the coming of the Magi – is hugely significant too because it shatters preconceived ideas that God was God only for the Jews, and makes it very plain that he is the God for all people for all time.

It is interesting that the story of the coming of the Magi is only found in Matthew's Gospel. It is a crucial and distinguishing theme of that Gospel as Matthew sets out to show the rejection of Jesus by the Jews and his acceptance by Gentiles. He does this in the coming of the Magi where we read that 'Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled'. As we know, this led eventually to the slaughter of the Innocents. In the Magi – Gentiles themselves from the East - we see the ones who came from afar and accepted him as the Christ, worshipped him and offered him their gifts. Jews sought to destroy: Gentiles were led to adore.

So what can this teach us? How can this story give us fresh insights, new epiphanies and new understandings of God?

If we look at Herod and his cronies we see them make assumptions on hearsay. They didn't actually **go** to Bethlehem themselves. They asked others to go for them and to 'search diligently' on their behalf. They stopped short of getting involved themselves – wanting to know *about* the Christ child from others, but not actually wanting to become fully committed, to meet him face to face themselves. I don't know about you, but I do know that I too find that I want to know more and more **ABOUT** God, but too often hesitate actually to come face to face with Him.

And what can we learn from the Magi? They had **travelled** a long way to find him, as we too travel towards him. We too are on a journey - not physically as they were perhaps, but spiritually. We do have to move on, to continue our journey, to develop and mature our relationship with God, to learn more and to struggle with our faith - to always search diligently, to persevere and to endure, to keep going. And just as the Magi followed where the light of the star led them in trust – not knowing where it might take them, asking the way, searching and keeping going - so must we follow the light of Christ, in faith and hope. And just as they found him, so shall we.

And having found him they did not stay still; they continued to travel onwards – they went home. But now they travelled as very different people - changed and transformed by their encounter with Christ. Just as God leads *us* on in ways we do not know. We find him and we still move on but as very different people, changed and transformed by our encounter with Christ.

The Magi came. They worshipped and they offered their love symbolised by their treasures. And so maybe we are led to ask ourselves: what are our treasures? What is most precious to us? Can we bring these things and offer them wholeheartedly to God? Can we offer them to him to use as he would wish for his glory, not our own? And can we offer them asking nothing in return – just as pure gift?

The Magi came, they worshipped and they laid their gifts before him **in utter silence**.

They did not come to him with requests or demands or questions. They did not come bombarding him with their woes, their troubles or their complaints. They came in silent adoration, giving all and asking nothing. They came with total concentration and focus on the Child not on themselves, and not even on others. Their whole being and attention was on worshipping him, and on the giving of themselves to him. In the words we have heard tonight from Isaiah – they saw him and were radiant. Then they departed quietly and utterly content.

Perhaps we could ponder the question: how often do we simply bring our love and our treasures and our daily lives to God, in worship and in silence? Offering all, but asking nothing. When we come here to worship, do we come for what we can give to God or for what we can get from God? When we go home have we made ourselves feel better? Or others? Or do we go maybe just knowing that God has been pleased to see us here and to welcome us with love?

Being with God in silence is such a great treasure. It is a treasure that we can both receive from him and offer to him - just being able to relax and be still in God's presence, just to enjoy him and to let him just enjoy us, to gaze on him, to see *him and be radiant*.

It is in the silence that we may hear his voice. We hear him because we are not cluttering up the airwaves with our endless chatter, with our interminable monologues of petitions and pleas, but resting in his love and listening for him in the silence. It was because they were silent that the Magi were able to hear the still small voice of God telling them to return home a different way. They were guided by God in the right way because they were silent and listening, as we can be if we too can learn to be silent.

And so in silence let us offer to God our treasures this evening. And together, in silence, let us now like the Magi just 'look to him and be radiant'. Amen.