

## God's Epiphany

Hebrews 2:13: *"I will put my trust in him."*

Al Capone was a gangster who lived in Chicago in the 1920's. He was notorious for the murders he committed and the illegal things he had done but managed to stay out of jail thanks to his excellent lawyer called Easy Eddie. Easy Eddie was paid very well and he had a son whom he loved. He gave his son all the best things while he was growing up: clothes, cars and a good education. He tried to teach him right from wrong but he couldn't give his son was a good name and a good example. Easy Eddie decided that these was more important than all the riches he had given his son, so he went to the authorities in order to rectify the wrong he'd done. In order to tell the truth, it meant he must testify against Capone for tax evasion, knowing that it would put his life in danger. Yet he had had this epiphany experience, so he testified and Capone was imprisoned. One year later Easy Eddie was killed on a lonely street in Chicago.

Butch O'Hare was an American Navy aviator during the Second World War and in 1942 was part of a squadron that was sent from an aircraft carrier to locate the Japanese fleet. His aircraft developed a problem and his squadron leader instructed him to return. On the way back he ran into a formation of Japanese heavy bombers approaching his aircraft carrier which they were going to attack. It was at that point he had an epiphany experience and knew what he had to do. So despite having limited ammunition, he single-handedly attacked the Japanese aircraft and was credited with shooting down five bombers becoming the first naval aviator recipient of the Medal of Honour in World War II. He was killed in action the following year and six years later the Chicago-area airport was named after him in honour of his exploits. It still retains that name today: O'Hare International Airport, Chicago.

These two short stories about men having an epiphany experience are not unrelated because Easy Eddie was Butch O'Hare's father.

What does "epiphany" mean and what is it?

Epiphany - also known as Three Kings' Day - is a Christian festival, which starts on 6 January. It is a special date in the Christmas story when people celebrate how a star led the Magi to visit the baby Jesus after he had been born. 'Epiphany' comes from the Greek word meaning 'to reveal', such as when the baby Jesus was 'revealed' to the world. This is why you might hear people say they've had an epiphany, when they've just realised something. Therefore, as I understand it, an

epiphany is one of those moments in life when something profound is revealed to us such as experienced by Easy Eddie and Butch O'Hare. Another example is Marie Curie who conducted pioneering research into radioactivity and something new was revealed. We have epiphanies all the time. Every day we learn new things about ourselves and the world around us yet our epiphanies might not have as great an impact as Marie Curie's, or Easy Eddie's or Butch O'Hare's, but they are epiphanies –revelations—all the same. One epiphany I had was to end any chance of becoming a chef due to being allergic to garlic and raw onions. Other epiphanies were when I ended my three year engagement to a lovely Christian girl and then married Vivien 18 months later having only met with her on four occasions. I knew that both these epiphanies were from God and both required obedient actions.

Therefore, from a spiritual perspective, this morning we will be looking briefly at God's Epiphany and how He reveals His grace to us in His Word and in our lives.

In His Word.

The story of the Wise Men is familiar to us but certain facts have been embellished over the years e.g.

- we don't know how many Wise Men there were. The Bible says nothing about the number of them, just the kinds of gifts they brought.
- they were from the "East", most likely Persia, or modern-day Iran which means they travelled hundreds of miles to see the Christ child.
- they rode on horses - camels were only used for baggage.
- they did not visit Jesus at the stable on the night of His birth but came days, months, or possibly even years later. That is why Matthew 2:11 says the wise men visited and worshiped Jesus in a house, not at the stable.

We need to be careful not to say more than the Bible does. After all, this is God's epiphany, His revelation, and in His Word He tells us that "magi from the east came to Jerusalem."

"Magi" literally means "wise man" and the term is also used to describe people who were astrologers, magicians, sorcerers, pagan priests, and those involved with the occult. Consequently, when we think about it, these don't sound like very "wise" men and might have been involved in activities not pleasing to God.

So, the question is this: how did these foreigners know to look for the Saviour?

The answer: they had God's Word.

The prophet Daniel had been exiled as a slave to Babylon where he worked in the Persian Court alongside magi or wise men. He would have prophesied to them about the date of the Messiah's birth hundreds of years before it happened. The magi would also have known about the coming Saviour from Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet, who had foretold the coming of the Star that would herald Messiah for all the tribes of Israel (Numbers 24). In addition, one of Daniel's pupils named Zoroaster had incorporated these prophecies in his bible, called the Zend Avesta, and Zoroastrianism was the State Religion of Persia at the time of Christ's birth. It prophesied that there would be born unto the Jews a King Messiah, and that His coming would be heralded by a sign in the heavens in the constellation Virgo. We refer to it as The Star of Bethlehem.

This sign in the heavens was an oddly illuminated cloud that was described in Daniel 7 as the 'Cloud of Heaven' and also qualified for the word 'star'. This same Glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds just before the angels announced Messiah's birth to them. Similarly, when the Persian Magi arrived near Bethlehem, the Shekinah would be seen standing above and marking the very place where Messiah lay. They would immediately recognize this as a sign of Messiah's presence.

God led the Magi to see His great epiphany by taking them straight to Jerusalem where they enquired about the place the King of the Jews had been born. Everyone appeared unaware concerning Jesus' birth including king Herod who was disturbed and summoned his chief priests and teachers of the law to ask them where the Christ was to be born. *"In Bethlehem in Judea,"* they replied, *"for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"*

These Magi left their homes seeking truth in a star and were basing their travels on information that had been passed down to them. The Lord graciously gave the Magi the truth in His holy Word and then led them using a star to see that Word fulfilled.

God longs to lead us to his Word every day, so that we can grow in our faith and understanding. The Word of God is an epiphany in itself revealing God's grace that all our sins were laid on Jesus; our punishment fell on him and because of Christ we are forgiven children of God. The Scriptures testify of Christ, *"These are the Scriptures that testify about me."* (John 5:39) and without God's Word, there is no

guidance or comfort. That's a revelation we all can perceive and yet we continue to carry our burdens around, handle things ourselves, attempting to solve our own problems and those of the world rather than giving them to God. Sadly this is a miserable epiphany. We see that life is miserable and frustrating. Without the Bible we soon see that our trust is misplaced, our hope misguided, and knowledge is misunderstood. God has given us His Word in which He has revealed himself to us. We have a Saviour! In Him we find answers to questions, guidance through life, and hope for eternity.

Isaiah 63:9 says, *"In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old."*

So God's Epiphany reveals His grace to us not only in His Word but also in our lives:

Stanley was my friend in Bangor and he was a giant of a man and played rugby at national level. Although I didn't know him during his playing career he was known as a hard drinker. His hands revealed the scars of bar fights after matches and he was the team member who carried crates of beer onto the bus at away matches. However, that lifestyle finished when he became a Christian – there was no more booze, no fights, no aggression, no bad language, no bad attitude. His life changed as a result of God's grace – his epiphany! The elderly ladies in our fellowship group looked upon him as a giant terry bear.

Robert was a pipe and cigarette smoker who attended a weekly Bible study in my office. Sam was a Pentecostal elder and felt Robert should not be smoking as it was a poor witness and destroying his body which was the temple of the Holy Spirit. He was going to confront Robert with this truth but needed to be circumspect in the way he approached it. Blundering out the truth could have been counterproductive and be perceived as condemnation, so I encouraged Sam to pray about it and let God convict. That was an epiphany experience for Sam and he graciously complied, praying earnestly for the next three weeks. At the end of that time Robert walked into my office. He had had an epiphany experience and knew he shouldn't smoke so he asked Sam and I to pray for him. The need for nicotine was removed instantly and the whole experience was a blessing to all three of us.

God's Word reveals his grace to us in our lives and when He does, one of two things happens. We either respond like the Magi or act like Herod who was blinded to the truth. He was preoccupied with his own position of power and authority and wasn't seeking the Messiah as the Magi

were. It would appear that he did not give any thought to the Messiah until the Magi appeared in the city and his position in society was threatened. Once that happened, Herod became enraged. The Messiah, promised by God, would be born the King of the Jews and was going to take away his kingdom. This revelation had an impact on Herod and he tried to suppress the message by going on a mad killing spree ordering the death of all baby boys two years old and younger.

Just like king Herod, God's grace impacts our lives. His grace forces us to deal with our own selfishness and insists we address our own greedy ambitions. It does battle with our sinful hearts and God reveals that our "little kingdoms" should not have the pre-eminent position. Yet, deep down, we all want to be kings of our own lives with praise and adulation. We long to surround ourselves with the possessions we declare "royal necessities" from the home in which we live and the clothes we wear to the food we eat. We need the right labels, the right name brands in order to feel accepted in our kingdoms but what happens when Christ comes and dares to be King in our lives? How do we react when He wants to be royalty? Our first reaction is to be like king Herod and we are thrown into turmoil but the Lord doesn't want our possessions. He wants our heart. He wants to shine first in our life and once he has our heart everything else fades in comparison. That was the Magi's epiphany. They weren't biblical scholars but they believed in the King of kings. God had revealed his grace to them and led them to realize that they had wealth beyond their wildest dreams. It wasn't the gold, frankincense, or the myrrh. Their greatest treasure was Jesus Christ, the light of the world. That treasure moved them to share their other treasures in worship to the Lord.

God's grace leads us to be more like the Magi who, unlike Herod, truly wanted to worship the Messiah King. God has revealed his grace in our lives and we should have the same desire to worship God with sincerity. The gifts we bring to our Lord come from our hearts whether it's helping provide refreshments on Sunday morning, or cleaning the Rest Rooms, or playing the Last Post at a funeral, or being involved in leadership, or participating in an area of ministry, or praying for someone else – its worship to our King. That should be our epiphany.

So as we open up the treasures of our lives and offer them in humble service to our Saviour what can we give to Him in 2023?

Apart from spending time with Him, or sharing our wealth with others less fortunate, or visiting the sick and lonely, may I remind you that the epiphanies of the Magi, Marie Curie, Easy Eddie and Butch O'Hare, impacted other people in a positive way. Therefore, since an epiphany is

one of those moments in life when something profound is revealed, may I suggest that it is possible for us to activate an epiphany in the life of others such as giving:

To our enemy . . .forgiveness,  
To our opponent . . .tolerance.  
To a friend . . . our heart.  
To a customer . . . service.  
To all men and women . . .charity.  
To every child . . . a good example.

We are not excluded because we can give ourselves. . . .self respect

We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving.

God has proven that to us.

He gave himself to us because he loves us.

God's love is revealed in his Word and his love is reflected in our lives as we worship him with our lives.

Now, that's an epiphany.

*"Praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens."*

*"I will put my trust in him."*

Amen

Bible readings:

Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:1-12, Psalms 148; Hebrews 2:10-18