

## Sermon: Epiphany

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, as we move from Christmas into the season of Epiphany make us conscious of your manifestation in our Lord and in our world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

In the Anglican Prayer Book, the collects (many of which are ancient prayers) and readings start from the first Sunday in Advent. And the first Sunday in Advent marks the beginning of the Church year. So each year, the Church calendar begins late November/ early December.

**Advent** lasts for about 4 weeks and, as we've seen throughout our December services, looks forward to the Incarnation.

**Christmastide** runs the twelve days from December 25<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> January, and Epiphany always falls on January 6<sup>th</sup>. The nearest Sunday to January 6<sup>th</sup> is called Epiphany Sunday. So today, being 5<sup>th</sup> January, is both the last day of Christmastide as well as Epiphany Sunday.

**Epiphany** always strikes me as a neglected season. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost all seem to stand out, but Epiphany not so much. I'm not really sure why that should be. Perhaps it's harder to grasp. Depending on Easter, Epiphany can last anywhere between 4 and 9 weeks and it terminates on Ash Wednesday.

**Ash Wednesday** marks the beginning of Lent. *Lent* comes from the old English word meaning *lengthen* and is a long forty day period of contemplation which leads up to Good Friday.

**Easter Day** is of course the centre of the Church year.

**Pentecost** follows Easter and on the first Sunday after Pentecost comes **Trinity**.

The season of Trinity is sometimes referred to as *Ordinary Time* in the Church calendar. It's the longest season, some 25 weeks, and focuses on our growth and development, both individually and collectively as a Church.

Trinity then brings us back to Advent.

The point of all this is to show that the church year:

- 1 hangs together logically and
- 2 unfolds progressively

So what about Epiphany?

Epiphany comes from a Greek word which carries the idea of *manifestation, appearance, revelation, unveiling* and even *awareness*.

In the Western Church (that is the Christian Church centred on Rome, not the Eastern Orthodox Churches) Epiphany starts with the Magi. The story of the magi is important because it brings Psalm 72 into focus.

We looked at Psalm 72 a few weeks ago on Advent Sunday if you remember. Psalm 72 speaks of the just and righteous King to whom gentile kings of Seba and Sheba come bearing gifts. This is fulfilled in the New Testament which portrays Jesus as that righteous King who, in contrast to the kings of the earth, brings justice to the poor and upholds the oppressed. That's at least one connection.

The Magi were likely astrologers or scholars from a region possibly corresponding to modern-day Iran or Iraq. Because they probably practised divination and the interpretation of dreams they're often referred to as 'the wise men'.

So now we not only have a connection with Psalm 72, we also have an echo of the prophet Daniel who was one of the captives deported to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar. We know that Daniel was appointed chief over the wise men of Babylon (Daniel 4.9). The magi would have been familiar with the writings of exiled Jewish priests from the earlier Assyrian and Babylonian deportations of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries and would have known of various Old Testament foretellings about the coming of a Saviour, including the cryptic 'messianic star' passage in Numbers 24.17-18: *a star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel*.

Now the 'star in the east' in Matthew chapter 2 would have fascinated the wise men because, as we've said, they would probably have been familiar with the writings of Daniel. Malachi had spoken of Bethlehem in Judea being the *place* of Messiah's birth (Malachi 3.1-3) but it was Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy which gave the approximate *time* of his coming (Daniel 9.24).

So, given all this, it's hardly surprising that expectations were running high in Judea around the time of the first century. Many Jews expected Messiah to appear soon and deliver the nation from the political and cultural bondage imposed by Rome. Nor is Herod the Great's response surprising. His reaction to the news about some kind of messiah-king was swift and brutal and very much in keeping with his character.

According to first century Jewish historian Josephus<sup>2</sup> Herod suffered from paranoia. He was also ruthless. He tells us, for instance, that Herod executed one of his sons just five days before his own death. He also murdered another son and one of his wives. At the same time, Herod the Great was a brilliant architect who initiated massive building projects, including the large port-city of Caesarea which he

dedicated to Octavian (that is, Caesar Augustus in Luke 2.1), and he expanded the Second Temple founded by Zerubbabel in Jerusalem during the post-exilic period (c. 516BC). That is, after the Babylonian exile when Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their land.

In the Eastern Church – that is, in the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches - Epiphany is marked, not by the magi, but by the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. This qualifies as an epiphany because it marks the *manifestation* of Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

There are different epiphanies in the Bible. In fact they're all over the place if we care to look; different ways in which God reveals himself. The Prayer Book takes us through some of these as we go through the season of Epiphany. For example, the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, or the healing of the centurion's servant, the stilling of the storm on the sea of Galilee, and so on.

In what are sometimes called the miracles of the Old Creation<sup>3</sup>, Jesus converts water into wine at the wedding in Cana and here we see the manifestation of God. God also manifests himself when in the natural vine he initiates a growth process that leads to the production of a juice which then ferments. Thus God turns water into wine all over the place every day. It's just that in Cana of Galilee, at this particular time in this particular place we see the epiphany close up and on a small scale.

Jesus feeds multitude. He converts a little bread into much bread and in this we see the manifestation of God. God turns a small amount of wheat into an abundance of wheat every year in the harvest. That's why we have harvest festivals – to give God thanks for the harvest. Both are epiphanies. It's just that one shows in an intense way what the other shows in ways too big for some of us to see.

When Jesus heals the centurion's servant we again see a manifestation or epiphany of God. God also heals millions of people every day with and without medical help such as our wonderfully designed human bodies. We might the doctor heals. But he doesn't. Medical intervention might *aid* the healing process, but no doctor ever truly heals. Every cut heals itself. No matter how good the doctor or the dressing it can never cause skin to grow over a wound on a dead body.

So it is that in both the Gospels and in the world we see the epiphanies of God. St Athanasius way back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century was right when in his famous treatise on the Incarnation he saw an essential likeness between our Lord's miracles, Jesus's miracles, and the general order of nature. Epiphanies are there if we look – but they're often hidden in plain sight.

Ephesians

Given that Epiphany Sunday is specifically about the manifestation of God to the

*Gentiles* as shown by the story of the magi in Matthew chapter 2, it also extends to our epistle reading from Ephesians 3:1-12.

Here Paul describes a *mystery*: *This mystery* (he says) *is that through the gospel the gentiles are heirs... and sharers together in the promise in Jesus Christ*. This mystery, as Paul calls it, is an epiphany because manifests the fact that through the Incarnation salvation extends beyond ethnic Israel and out into the Gentile world.

And this chimes with the story of the magi (because *they* were gentiles). Secondly it chimes with the Old Testament where Isaiah speaks of Messiah who will *appear* – that is, become *manifest* - as a light to lighten the Gentiles (Isaiah 42.6). So all these things are connected.

But why is this all so important?

Well, when in Jesus we see the manifestation of God he shows us what a human being is meant to look like. That's the first thing. Jesus is an epiphany, a manifestation, of the *imago Dei*, the image of God.

The second thing is that through the crucifixion and resurrection Jesus has opened a door for those who are drawn to him and would receive him, to become fully human too, no matter who they are, Jew or Gentile. As St John puts it in 1.12: *but as many as received him to them he gave power to become the children of God...*

This happens, first through new life – or rebirth - in the Spirit (John 3.3) which is the guarantee of our inheritance which Paul speaks about in 2 Corinthians 1.22 where he says: *God set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come*.

And, then secondly, and ultimately, it happens through the bestowal of a new resurrection body like unto his resurrection body. Paul makes this point absolutely clear in Philippians... *who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself*. (Philippians 3.21).

In other words, through the manifestation of God in Christ we, who receive him will one day function perfectly; as human beings are *meant* to function and as part of the new creation.

In the meantime, as the magi came bearing gifts, we too bear gifts. Yet our gift is not a material thing, it's a spiritual thing.

This is beautifully summed up in the Prayer Book's post-communion Prayer:

*... here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies to be*

*a reasonable holy and lively sacrifice unto thee; ... And although we be unworthy through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences thorough Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The last Sunday of Epiphany stands in vivid contrast to what takes place just a few days later: namely, Ash Wednesday. Having witnessed the manifestation of God we're suddenly brought face to face with our own sinful natures. We realise that we do not, like Jesus, reflect what a human being is meant to look like. Ash Wednesday is a day of sorrow and repentance that initiates the season of Lent.

Lent reflects Psalm 23. It's a time of contemplation (on our mortality and sinfulness) as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But we do so in hope. Those in Christ *fear no evil* (Psalm 23 verse 4) And why not? Because, says the psalmist, *thou art with me, thy rod and staff they comfort me*. And just as the 23rd Psalm concludes on a note of hope and trust in God's everlasting care – *surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life* - Lent culminates in the celebration of Easter, which is nothing less than new creation in resurrection – to the end that we might also partake of that new creation through the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our inheritance.

So as we travel through the next few weeks let's be sensitive to the ways God reveals himself to us personally and in the world. Let's be *aware* of him knocking on the door of our lives: *Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him*, says Jesus in Revelation 3.20.

The awareness of God knocking on the door of our lives is very important. It's possible *not* to hear the person at the door. It's what Jesus meant when he often concluded his parables with the words, *he that has ears to hear, let him hear*. Not everyone *can* hear and there may be all sorts of reasons why they can't. Interestingly, these words *he that has ears to hear let him hear*, also appear in the book of Revelation which is itself all about Epiphany. That's why it's called the *revelation* of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1.1). Epiphany *is* revelation. It's the revelation of God.

Even with our human limitations it's possible to know God's revelation of himself in different ways. For example, we can know God through intuition – what John Calvin<sup>4</sup> famously called, *the sensus divinitatus*, the sense of God within our human spirit.

We can know God through prayer. The great Archbishop William Temple said: *When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't*. We should be alert to God's so-called “coincidences” as manifestations, or epiphanies; *appearances* of himself to us. And of course to be always ready to give thanks.

God can also reveal himself through our powers to read and think and understand. St John opens his Gospel with: *in the beginning was the Word...* The word *Word* is the

Greek word *logos*,...by whom all things were made (John 1.1&3). We get our word logic from it. The *logos* - as the Word made flesh, connects us with the rationality of God. So we can know God through these faculties. (see references: Meyer<sup>5</sup>)

But there is perhaps another way we can know God, and that's through having or experiencing a heightened awareness of God's presence in the world.

Christian mystics like St John of the Cross, or Bernard of Clairvaux or Julian of Norwich or St Francis of Assisi can perhaps teach us something here. We are of course human beings, limited in our capacity to know God as God, because God is ultimate reality. Yet through quiet contemplation, God our Father can and does make himself known.

For example, much can be gained from contemplating Paul's words in Acts 17.28: that *in God we live and move and have our being* if we just sit and think about that and let it work on us.

Or by meditating on Exodus 3.14 as St Thomas Aquinas famously does in his *On Being and Essence*. When Moses asks God who God is, God replies: I AM THAT I AM. In other words, God's essence (what God essentially *is*) is *existence*. This is a profound insight which we can benefit from. (see References Rasmussen<sup>6</sup>, 2018; Bobik<sup>7</sup>, 1988)

Or we can become aware that God sustains all things by the Word of his power. This is something reflected in John 1.1 (*all things were made by him and nothing was made that has been made*) and Colossians 1.17 where Paul says, *He (Jesus, the Word) is before all things, and in him all things consist or hold together*.

By dwelling on and thinking about things such as these and taking them in we allow God to make himself known to us.

So what can we take away this morning? How does Epiphany speak to us?

1 Well, firstly, St Paul tells us in Ephesians that because we are now *in Christ* and one *with Christ*, we bear a new nature and, like the Israel of old, are chosen by God. As Christians, as Messiah-people, we have been bought at a price and have a new responsibility. *For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.* (1 Corinthians 6.20).

2 Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of God to the Gentiles, and we are Gentiles. Still, it doesn't give us an answer to all the questions and struggles we face and will face, in life or as individuals within a society which has alienated itself from God. But the manifestation of God in various and varied ways does help us approach our questions *about life*.

For example, epiphanies of God help us discern *that* God is (he is the Creator of heaven and earth), also who we are, our condition, and how we stand in relation to God and to the world. In other words, as I live my life in respect of my family, my neighbourhood, my denomination, my country, I'm called to live by growing more and more into the image of Christ. We are called to be salt and light *manifesting* Jesus in the world as his agents and models (Matthew 5.13-16).

Today, we are called, like the magi, to show up, to be open to new epiphanies, to look in unexpected places, to look to the edges, to notice the mystery of Christ and the activity of God in our own souls and in the world.

We're called to look out with a new vision and become *aware* of our God who is so often hidden in plain sight.

And then to give thanks, and to offer the gift of the new life in Christ we've received in service – offering and presenting *ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable holy and lively sacrifice unto Him ...trusting him always to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Let us pray:* Heavenly Father as you have revealed yourself to us in your dear Son may we respond to your love by growing more and more into His likeness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## References

1 Eric Hedlin <https://evolutionnews.org/2023/12/the-christmas-star-a-sign-of-design/>

2 Josephus on Herod the Great

Josephus' accounts of Herod the Great appear *The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*. *The Antiquities of the Jews*

Book XVII, Chapter 6: Josephus recounts an incident where Herod deprives the high priest Matthias of his position and burns another Matthias who had led a sedition. He details how an eclipse occurred on the night of the execution, thus emphasizing Herod's cruelty. Book XVII, Chapter 8: Here Josephus describes Herod's death, his will, and behaviour in his final days. Josephus depicts him as a man of great barbarity, filled with anger and mistrust (paranoia), even going so far as to execute his own son just five days before his death

*The Jewish War*

Book I, Chapters 21 and 33: These chapters discuss Herod's political maneuvers and his notorious execution of several of his family members, including his wife Mariamne and sons, highlighting his ruthlessness and paranoia.

3 C S Lewis God in the Dock p,24. Miracles of the Old Creation.

In his book *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, C S Lewis makes a distinction between "miracles of the Old Creation" and "miracles of the New Creation". Miracles of the Old Creation are miracles of God which pertain to the pre-Christian era, often in the context of the natural world. They include the instances mentioned in the sermon and demonstrate God's activity in the world; hidden in plain sight. Miracles of the New Creation on the other hand are miracles associated with the Incarnation and Resurrection. They are epiphanies which show God's activity in redemption and transformation and include such miracles as the raising of Lazarus, being born again, and the 'mystery' surrounding the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. **Lewis argues that while both types of miracles are supernatural interventions, the miracles of the New Creation are more profound because they signify the ultimate purpose of God's plan for humanity. C S Lewis was clearly influenced by St Athanasius of Alexandria.**

St Athanasius of Alexandria (AD 296-373) *On the Incarnation of the Word*  
Athanasius argues that Jesus's miracles reveal God in Christ in a way which is consistent with the order of creation. Jesus' miracles aren't contrary to nature but rather reflect God's creative power. By performing miracles, Jesus shows that He is the Word made flesh (John 1.14) who brought all things into existence and sustains them.

In other words, he sees what Jesus does as a continuation of the natural order



established by God. For example, when Jesus calms the storm, it's not just a suspension of natural laws but a revelation of His authority over creation. Similarly, His healing miracles show that He has the power to restore and perfect human nature, which was originally created in the image of God.

4 Calvin, J. (1536) *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

5 Meyer, S. (2009) *Signature in the Cell*. Harper Collins.

6 Rasmussen, J. (2018) *The Bridge of Reason*.

7 Bobik, J. (1988) *On Being and Essence – A translation and interpretation*.  
University of Notre Dame Press.

## **SERVICE DETAILS**

### **Sermon Title: The Epiphany**

#### **Hymns**

83 As with gladness men of old, did the guiding start behold

89 O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

87 Hail to the Lord's anointed great David's greater son.

490 Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run

#### **Selected Psalm: Psalm 72:10-11**

“May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts. May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him.”

#### **Prayer Cycle: A Prayer for Holy Trinity FCE Church Oswaldtwistle**

Heavenly Father, Today we ask your blessing upon Holy Trinity FCE Church. Guide their minister and deacons in all their service for you and place in them your wisdom. We ask you will fill the hearts and minds of their congregation with love and compassion and may your light shine through them as a beacon of hope and faith in the community. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

#### **Collect**

O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith, may at last behold your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### **Readings**

Isaiah 60:1-6 (Elise)

Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6 (Rowi)

Matthew 2:1-12 (Doug)

#### **A Prayer for the Children**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the joy and wonder of our children here at St Barnabas, and we ask that you will bless Sunday school. Lord, fill the hearts of teachers and pupils with your love, make the children receptive to your teaching and spirit and guide their footsteps so they may grow in faith and understanding. Bless their awareness of your presence and know in their hearts that you are always there beside them. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

#### **A Prayer for the Persecuted Church**

Heavenly Father, We lift up to You our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world who face persecution for their faith. We pray especially for those in prison camps in North Korea, those in Afghanistan who must meet in secret, those targeted by Islamic violence in Iran, Saudi-Arabia and sub-saharan Africa and those who face the effects of blasphemy laws in Pakistan or violence in places like Myanmar and India. Grant them courage, strength, and unwavering faith amidst their trials and may they hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints who so long ago faced similar situations. Surround them with Your protection and grace, and may they always feel Your living and abiding presence. Let their faith inspire and encourage all of us to stand firm in Your love and truth. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

## **We Pray for the Persecuted Church throughout the World.**

Heavenly Father, We bring before you our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for their faith. We ask that you will strengthen them in the face of trial and deliver them from evil and all who seek their hurt. We ask that they may know your peace in their hearts and remain steadfast in Jesus knowing by the Spirit your presence with them in the midst of their struggles.

This week we pray especially for our Christian brethren in:

North Korea where they are persecuted for their faith, facing imprisonment, forced labor, or execution. And we pray for your blessing on the underground Church there.

We remember our brothers and sisters in Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Nigeria where they face murder, abduction and displacement from the likes of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and Fulani and other Islamist militant groups.

We pray for the persecuted Church in Malaysia and Vietnam as Christians face restrictions, random and indiscriminate arrest and demolition of church buildings.

Strengthen we pray our Christian brethren in Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia where public worship is hindered or prohibited altogether, and where the threat of arrest and imprisonment or deportation looms large.

O Lord shield them all from harm. Deliver them from the hand of their oppressors and sustain their faith in Jesus, their Lord and ours. In their trials may they look unto Him, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before *him* endured the cross, despised the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God. And so encourage them by your Scriptures.

We pray also for their oppressors and persecutors. We ask Lord that you will open their eyes to the light of life in Christ and be drawn by that light to your truth and love in Jesus. In repentance may they come to know You as their Savior and Lord and the only lasting hope for their countries.

And finally O Lord we give you thanks for the peace and security we enjoy. Keep us safe from harm and bless our democratic way of life and those who protect us.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.