

Sermon: *Epiphany 2017 – January 8th 2017*

(Readings: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12)

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May I speak in the name of the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Part 1: Introduction

Well that's it - Christmas is over! Have you taken down your Christmas trees and put the decorations away? I hope Father Christmas was kind to you.

Interestingly, in Spain children traditionally don't get presents on Christmas Day – they're brought by 'Los Tres Reyes' (the 'Three Kings') on January 6th, the festival of Epiphany, which marks the Wise Men's visit to the baby Jesus (the *Bible* doesn't say they were 'kings').

Epiphany was last Friday, so we're celebrating it *today*, the nearest Sunday.

Part 2:

The word '*epiphany*' comes from a Greek word meaning '*to reveal*'. The dictionary defines it as '*a moment of sudden and great revelation*'; '*a sudden sense of being in touch with the essential meaning of something*'; or '*a powerful religious experience*'.

Many of *us* can probably recall moments when *we've* suddenly felt a special *something*, difficult to describe but *powerful* all the same - where *we've* felt *in touch* with something *beyond* ourselves. This *can* be triggered by particular *places* - places of awe-inspiring *natural* beauty, or places of *spiritual* significance.

It happened to *me* in Jerusalem two years ago, when I felt drawn (along with Bishop Christopher and some other members of our pilgrimage) to put on a Jewish skull-cap / 'kippah', and stand with hundreds of Jews, all quietly praying with our faces up against that most sacred of Jewish sites, the mighty 'Western wall' (all that remains of the Temple destroyed by the Romans in AD 70). The experience was *electric*.

A notable '*epiphany*' (though a pedant might prefer the word 'theophany') in the Old Testament occurs when God speaks to Moses from out of the Burning Bush. When Moses asks God's name, God simply replies '*I am!*' - for this isn't *one* God among others, this is the Creator of *all* that is, the *ground* of all *being*.

Likewise, in that tiny baby God was *revealed* to those three 'Wise Men'/'magi', non-Jews, who travelled from a distant land to find a new born 'king of the Jews'.

Part 3

These days, *we've* rather lost touch with the awesome splendour of the starry sky - it's obscured by street lamps and illuminated signs. It was different in the ancient world, especially in *desert* lands with cloudless skies. There, people carefully studied the stars. They believed everything in the universe was connected; any *unusual* event in the *heavens* was thought to indicate a remarkable event on *earth*.

The year Jesus was born, now thought to be 7 BC (as David Morgan recently explained), we know that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were 'in conjunction' with each other several times – which would have given the appearance of a new, unusually bright star moving across the sky.

Since Jupiter was regarded as the '*royal*' planet and Saturn was thought to represent the *Jews*, it's quite feasible that 'magi' from lands east of modern Jordan might conclude that a new 'king of the Jews' was to be born, and that this was of such *cosmic significance* as to be reflected in the heavens.

Part 4

Matthew's is the only gospel to mention the 'Wise Men'. In fact, only he and Luke even mention Jesus' childhood; Mark and John don't refer to it. As *John* notes, though, there was *so much* that *could*

have been written about Jesus' life that it would fill many books. So, each gospel writer chose to focus on those things which seemed most relevant to the *message* he wanted to convey to his *intended audience*.

Scholars agree that Matthew was a *Jewish* Christian, writing for a *Jewish* audience around AD 80, at a time when many Christians still saw themselves as part of the Jewish community. But there were growing *tensions*, so Matthew is at pains to *show* that Jesus is the *fulfilment* of the Old Testament prophecies - that Jesus of Nazareth *is* the long-expected *Messiah*, that he *rose* from the *dead*, and is uniquely endowed with *divine* authority.

The Wise Men (naturally enough) first go to Jerusalem, to the royal palace, in search of this newborn King. But Herod sends them to *Bethlehem*, after asking his priests and scribes where the Messiah is to be born – as we've heard in our reading, they quote the prophet Micah.

[Part 5](#)

The prophets' role in ancient Israel was a powerful one. It was to: *interpret*, for the people and rulers, what God's *will* was at that time; and to *urge* them to *obey* this. Written records of the prophets' pronouncements could be *modified* by subsequent generations, though, since the word of God (revealed through a prophet) *continued* to have relevance in the changed situations in which God's people later found themselves.

Particularly *influential* was the book of *Isaiah*, written by at least two different prophets over three centuries - before, during, and after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and its people's long Exile in Babylon.

Both 'Isaiah's *warn* the people and rulers that they'll bring *disaster* upon themselves. Isaiah 1 says on God's behalf: "*I reared them and brought them up, but they're a sinful nation ... who do evil who deal corruptly ... who have forsaken the Lord Even though you make many prayers I won't listen cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."*

They had forgotten the basic intention of their *Covenant* with God – that they should: love *God*, and aim to create and sustain a *society* where people *support* one another and show concern for the welfare of *all*, rather than prizing personal gain above everything. [Does that ring a few bells today? – maybe it should!]

Nevertheless, as the *second* Isaiah reminds them: God *loves* his people, he *will* forgive them, *rescue* them ('redeem' them), provided they *truly repent* and turn over a new leaf. In particular, those who've shown repentance during their long Exile will be *restored*. (Eventually, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed the exiles to return).

[Part 6](#)

The Book of Isaiah has had a significant influence on *Christianity*. It's cited by Jesus himself and by the gospel writers, who interpreted it as foretelling *his* coming. Handel's magnificent choral work, the '*Messiah*', often performed around Christmas, contains several passages from Isaiah, including the opening words from our reading: "*Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you*". These are interpreted as announcing God's rescue plan for the *world* through the birth of his Son, the promised Messiah.

When Isaiah was *writing*, though, he was thinking about the *city of Jerusalem*, the centre of the nation laid waste by the invaders, and about the wonderful future it could have in store if only the people would return to God's ways.

During the violent centuries before Jesus' birth, the wonderful events Isaiah prophesied for *Jerusalem* never came about. But Matthew, and the other gospel writers, saw that they *were* in fact taking place *in the birth of Jesus* and it was around this *child* that the promised glory of the Lord had finally appeared.

The hopes, which for centuries were focussed on this noble *city*, regarded by pious Jews as the place where earth and heaven meet, and where God's holy presence is especially strong, were suddenly seen as being fulfilled in the birth of this *child* - in modest surroundings, in a little town, 2-hours' walk away in the middle of the countryside. And, it's really worth noting that the *first* people to visit him, to acknowledge him, were *outsiders* – in one case humble shepherds, in the other case non-Jewish foreigners.

Matthew was *rightly* at pains to convince his audience of Jesus' *Jewish* credentials, and trace Jesus' ancestry back to *Abraham*. But we should remember God's *promise* to Abraham and Sarah: "*in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed*". In *Jesus*, we find God's *new* Covenant (that's what the term '*New Testament*' means) which extends to *everyone* who puts their *faith* in *him*.

Later in Matthew, after the start of Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist sends word from prison asking '*are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*'. Jesus replies "*tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them*" (11: 2-5)

Conclusion

Places can be important, can have a powerful significance; Jerusalem rightly remains a place of pilgrimage. But '*epiphanies*' need not be tied to *place* – the glory of the Lord shone around that *child* not that *city*, and was *evident* in his *life*, his *death*, and his *resurrection*.

Let's remember: elsewhere in Matthew's gospel Jesus says "*wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also*" (18: 20). And, let's call to mind the words of a Latin chant we often sing in Taizé services: '*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*' - '*Where there's loving kindness, God is there*'.

The Wise Men brought *Jesus* gifts befitting a king. Jesus is *God's* freely bestowed gift to *us*. Let's ask ourselves: "*what gift can I offer him in my life?*"

Amen †