

## Epiphany

(A sermon preached at St John Baptist and St Mary's on the transferred Feast of the Epiphany)

### **'Inexplicable'**

(Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ps 72: 10-15; Eph 3: 1-12; Mt 2: 1-12)

The feast of the Epiphany, which is on 6 January but which we are keeping today, celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to the magi. The magi were non-Jewish visitors from an unnamed Eastern land. We traditionally characterise them as Kings, but all we know from Matthew's Gospel is that they were magi.

Magi were a varied group: some were priests, some interpreters of dreams and some what we would now call astrologers. Exactly what these magi's skills were, precisely where they came from and how many of them there were is not clear from what Matthew tells us. But that is less important than the fact that they came to Bethlehem, and that Jesus was made manifest to them, foreign strangers as they were. The main thing that this tells us, the central message of the Epiphany is that God is not a local or tribal god, but God for all people, God with all people.

But let's dig a little deeper into the story. When news about Jesus' birth came to the ears of King Herod, we hear that his reaction was fear. And it was the same with the local people of Jerusalem: they too were afraid when they heard about the birth of Jesus. But not so the magi: they were overwhelmed with joy and fell on their knees to pay homage. They gave precious gifts to Jesus.

Because we approach the Epiphany in the context of our Christmas celebrations, indeed as part of those celebrations, and because we have been celebrating Christmas as a joyous festival for some 2,000 years, the reaction of the magi seems natural. Of course they would be filled with joy when they saw Jesus; of course they would pay homage and offer him gifts. The shepherds too were filled with joy and offered praise to God when they saw the Christ-child. Who would not do so?

Yet the reaction of King Herod and the people of Jerusalem was surely much more natural and to be expected than this extraordinary visit and reaction of the magi. Herod was the King of the Jews: he had been appointed as such by the Romans. He was powerful and had been ruling in Judea for over 30 years. When news reached him, through the magi, that a new King of the Jews had been born, he was bound to be fearful. A new King threatened his own position.

And that in turn explains the reaction of the people of Jerusalem. The Jewish people were, at this time, tolerated under Roman rule – they were permitted to practice their own religion; they had the Temple and their priests. A rival Jewish King would more than upset the apple cart; the political instability could result in the Romans acting to quash any disorder, especially if this new King would not be subservient to Roman rule as Herod was. Enjoying the relative peace of Roman occupation as they did, the birth of a new King of the Jews carried with it a risk of serious trouble. No wonder they were afraid about the consequences.

But not the magi. We read that they were overcome with joy and bowed down and gave gifts. Now it's true, it is easy to see why they had no particular reason to be afraid of Jesus – they were visitors from a far land and would soon depart and go home. They were not at risk from political instability and regime change in Judea. Turmoil around the court of King Herod would not touch them.

But that still does not explain their joy, or their paying homage. Why should these people care at all about a new King of the Jews being born? This was not their King, after all. Judea was not their country and the God of Israel was not their god. So why come at all, and why fall to their knees before this new King? What did they see in Jesus to cause such an extraordinary reaction? Their reaction, their very presence, seems inexplicable.

I hope that you experienced an epiphany of your own this Christmas, a fresh revelation of the presence of God in our world, in your life. Epiphanies come in many and surprising ways and at unexpected times (just ask St Paul). We are not quite like the magi, seeing and following a star to a small town in a foreign country to discover a young child and his ordinary parents, and being overcome with joy at the sight.

So what was your epiphany this year? A word? A song? A moment of stillness by the fireside or in the candle light. The glint of something in the darkness? The smile on the face of a stranger or a friend? Did you see Jesus in the manger of a traditional Christmas celebration, or did you see God elsewhere and know that presence near to you; God amid the straw of your own stable, your own life?

If you did have an epiphany moment this year, or if you have ever had one, I suspect that, if you stepped back to look at it, you would decide that it was just as inexplicable as the epiphany to the magi. If we can know anything about such extraordinary moments of revelation, of wonder, of awe; those moments that drive us, like the magi, to our knees and bring us, like the magi, to offer praise, to offer of ourselves to the God who gives all that he is to us; if we can know anything at all about all this, it is surely that it is inexplicable. There is no recipe for it. We cannot conjure it up to order. This is not like Aladdin's lamp or a magician's incantation or a spiritualist's ritual. God

is not at our beck and call. Epiphanies happen, or they don't happen, we can't make them happen.

But we can notice them when they do happen, and there is something here that we can learn from these travelling magi of so long ago.

First, if we are to notice God among us, we must be expectant, we must be hopeful. The magi expected to see something; they travelled with their eyes open, with their minds open and with their hearts open. If we live with an attitude of cynicism, of scepticism or with closed hearts and blinkered vision, the chances are, unless we are one of the very few like St Paul on the road to Damascus, we will not see the manifestation of God's presence among us, even when it lies before us, there by the roadside, in the animal stall, in the manger.

Second, if we wish to know where an epiphany might be happening, we must be humble. Those who first saw the Christ, apart from Mary and Joseph who had their own special revelations, were not card-carrying members of the religious institution of their day. They were not bishops or priests or PCC members. They were not even churchgoers. They were somewhat disreputable shepherds from the margins of polite society and they were strangers of another religion and from a far country. That is who God chose to reveal God's self to back then. If we believe the Bible to be more than a series of great tales about the distant past, if we believe Scripture to have something to say about the present, then maybe this is how it still is now. God's manifestation not to or within the Church, but to those on the edge or beyond the edge of the Church. So as we seek to hear what God's Spirit is saying to us, here and now; as we seek to discern how best we should be Church in these days; as we seek to follow the leading of the star, we should learn the lesson of Epiphany: it was strangers and outsiders who first saw what we all seek.