

The Feast of the Epiphany (transferred)
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2024

Isaiah 6:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Lord Jesus, Light of the world, born in David's city of Bethlehem, born, like him, to be a king; be born in our hearts this festal time, be King of our lives today. Amen.

Well, happy feast! Today, the great Feast of the Epiphany, transferred from its proper date yesterday, marks the closing of the 12 days of Christmas, if you like the particular period of the Christian year where we focus on the birth in time, in a particular place, of our Lord Jesus Christ as a baby. But it isn't the end of Christmas season. For a very long time, certainly from the mediaeval period, the church has extended this season of rejoicing, of celebration, all the way through the month of January to the great feast of Candlemas at the very beginning of February. Our late Queen used to regularly remind us that she required the Christmas decorations to stay up at Sandringham until 2 February, and if it was good enough for her...

But there is a change of focus today. There is a change of emphasis. And partly that's because in the Western Church we have these two feasts, Christmas Day on 25 December, and then the feast of the Epiphany on 6 January, whereas in the churches of the East, in the orthodox churches, they really only have today, the Epiphany, as the one feast that gathers up all celebration around incarnation of Christ. For various complicated reasons that I can tell you all about over coffee if you really want to be put to sleep, we've ended up with two feasts. I think it's helpful to think of them like this: Christmas

Day is the day when we celebrate God becoming man. The day when God appears amongst us as one of us. And that is of course a deep and important theological truth. Epiphany is the day when we recognise that child as God. Let me just say that again: Christmas is when God appears as man. Epiphany is when the world acknowledges that child as God.

The word Epiphany can be translated variously as revelation, manifestation, showing. If you read back through that reading from the letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses lots of those words: 'revelation', 'revealed', 'make everyone see', 'made known'. Christmas is very domestic: local, in Bethlehem. A small collection of people: the Holy Family, some shepherds, maybe an innkeeper and a donkey. Epiphany is different. Epiphany is not domestic. Those Magi, those wise men, or kings, tradition later limits them to three, represent the wider world. They represent the fact that whatever else God is going to do in the life of this child of Bethlehem, it is absolutely not going to be domestic. This is going to be global. Indeed this might very well be cosmic. So they arrive from the east - the east in the culture of the day symbolising the other - seeking him who has been born king of the Jews, and bearing those mysterious gifts in which we see Matthew foreshadowing the sort of man that this child will grow up to be: a king, a priest, and a sacrificial victim.

This is an opening up of the vista. And it's worth noticing that Matthew builds his gospel quite deliberately in this way. Matthew is the only evangelist who includes the story of the visit of the strangers from outside the Jewish culture. Right at the very beginning he is saying, this is going to be big. And if you look at the very end of his gospel, what do you find? The Great Commission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.'

Epiphany is about the world recognising, in the child, their God. It is, if you like, both a promise and a challenge. This child is not going to be self-contained. This story is not going to be domestic. This is going to get out of hand.

A fortnight ago I drew your attention, when we were thinking about the Annunciation to Mary, to the closing lines of the great Christmas prologue, and I'd like to revisit that again this morning if I may. You don't probably need reminding of the words, but I shall read them anyway: 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.'

Christmas is the bit of the story where the Word became flesh. Epiphany is the bit of the story where 'we have seen his glory'. The wise men, the Magi, represent us. And they challenge us: have we seen his glory? Will we pack up our kit, climb onto our camel, and make the journey. Christina Rossetti wrote, didn't she, 'if I were a wise man, I would do my part.' Well, will we? A star has arisen for us as well, and it beckons us to come and follow. It leads us, as with gladness men of old, and in a gorgeous bit of liturgical arrangement in our church here in St Thomas's the star leads us directly to the altar. It literally stops over the place where the child lies, under the form of the Sacrament, waiting for us to kneel down and pay him homage.

And then we probably need to say something about Herod as well don't we? There's a very interesting article in this week's *Church Times* drawing parallels between Herod and the 'big men' of our own age, rulers who hold power through the imposition of fear and violence, Putin and the like, and pointing out that Epiphany calls out that sort of authority, which is, at the heart of it, of course, cowardice. The star rises, and we can be attracted or repelled by its dazzling. We can fling open the

window and bathe in starlight, or we can slam the shutters and pray for darkness. And although our gospel reading finishes with that glorious line about the Magi disappearing back into the East 'by another road' - and of course we hear nothing more about them and have no idea in what way their lives were transformed by this strange encounter - although our gospel reading ended there this morning, we know what happens next. And what happens next is mass slaughter, is infanticide, that which the church refers to as the Slaughter of the Innocents, and in the displacement of the Holy Family as refugees across the border into a safer country. And that has never stopped. Babies, as well as men and women, are dying in Gaza now. Babies, as well as men and women, are dying in Ukraine now. Men and women as well as babies are displaced, and move across the surface of the globe looking for a safer home now.

Herod presents us with, if you like, the shadow side of ourselves. And perhaps the Magi show us our better angels. If it is true that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we *can* see his glory. And seeing his glory, we are invited to recognise that it is full of grace and truth. And do you remember what we learnt about grace a fortnight ago, when we thought about Mary being filled with grace? We remembered where grace is present the kingdom grows.

And because that is sometimes quite a difficult task, it is sometimes hard to believe in grace, and truth, and maybe even harder to believe that grace and truth might want to come and live amongst us, and within us, Holy Mother Church takes pity on us, and gives us the season of Epiphany, this greater Christmastide, to help us on the way. So over the coming three weeks, as we stay in gold, as the crib and the star continue to dominate the liturgical theatre, we will hear about the call of the very first disciples, we will hear about water reddening into

wine at a wedding reception, and we will hear about an old man and an old woman who have waited their whole lives to see his glory, full of grace and truth, discover that their hearts' desire is right there in front of them. We will take heart in those stories, and respond to the invitation, ourselves, to see his glory, full of grace and truth.

The Magi and Herod. Angels and Demons. The domestic becoming universal. Christmas becomes Epiphany, the Word becomes flesh, and we have seen his glory.

Amen.