

The Second Sunday of Epiphany (second service)
St Thomas', Salisbury

Ez 2:1 – 3:4
Gal 1:11-24

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

It doesn't matter whether one is following the *Common Worship* cycle of readings for these days of January and early February, or the Book of Common Prayer, or actually the various provisions of the traditional or modern Roman church. Whichever set of resources we might choose to avail ourselves of, we find that the themes of January are all about the steady spread of the truth of Christmas. At Christmas itself we recognise that God has come among us. And then over these weeks between now and the beginning of Lent, only a month or so away, we are immersed in all sorts of different passages of Scripture and accounts of the early church, which combine to tell us how this mystery might affect us. January is the time for posing the question, "so if Christmas really *is* true, what difference might that make to me?"

Epiphany presents us with the fact that this faith is not a geographical one limited to Palestine of the first century, but is a faith for all peoples and nations. The Baptism of Christ, last week, provides us with deep truths about Christ, and about our own identity as people who share a fundamental connection with our Redeemer in the waters of the font. When we are baptised, we begin our journey home to God.

And the truths just keep spilling out. Here are three more, briefly, from our act of worship tonight. The first one, we note, is that the word of God spreads rather messily: In our second lesson we are reminded that Paul goes off in one direction, into Arabia, doing his own thing. Cephas, or Peter, is doing something else in Jerusalem. Even the greatest story ever told spreads messily, because it captivates the messy hearts of messy people. You and I.

The second, closely connected to the first, is that God chooses us as his messengers. The exquisite anthem that we have just heard was written by two men, Bruce Blunt, who wrote the poem, and Peter Warlock who wrote the music. Both were indifferent to Christianity, and indeed Warlock has been described as anti-Christian, and they wrote that anthem on a walk between two pubs, to fund a session of drinking. And yet Bethlehem Down is largely regarded as one of the most beautiful and liturgically well-turned of the Christmas repertoire:

When He is King they will clothe Him in grave-sheets,
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary
Sleeping so lightly on Bethlehem Down.

Christmas, as I so often say, points to Easter. And the manger points to the Cross.

And this is the message we are given to proclaim. That's the third brief point tonight. As alluded to in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, the Christian bears words that are bitter, and words that are sweet as honey, because such is the world. And it isn't up to us to reconcile all of that, but it is up to us to carry those words, and to proclaim them.

This is the season of revelation, the season of Epiphany, of showing to the world of the baby who is destined for the awful grandeur of the Cross. May we receive those words, both bitter and sweet, and in the midst of our messiness be ready to believe that we may be messengers and prophets of that message to the world.