

Sermon for Epiphany, 2020 – Revd Ian Welch, 5 January 2020

Epiphany is above all a festival associated with enlightenment and revelation; it's all about having our eyes opened to the truth. This is what the three Wise Men, the Magi, the Kings, experienced. They saw the pure light, and their eyes feasted on the brightness of God's presence revealed in the baby in the manger.

That Matthew tells the birth narrative in relation to the three Wise Men shows just how universal he wanted the Church to become. The travellers were, of course, Gentiles. That indeed was a revelation. Luke in his birth account also created shock waves by making his visitors the shepherds, who in Jesus's time were of lowly status, and would have been considered by orthodox Jews as *anawim* - those on the margins of respectable society.

But Matthew's tack is different. His visitors might have been of high status, **but** they were non-Jews. Matthew is making a telling point: that the Gentile believers championed by the Apostle Paul should play a full part in the new path of faith brought by Christ. He reinforces this point by making the sages from East such key players in his birth narrative.

These Gentile travellers stand as representatives for those from diverse cultures who find their way to Christ today also. They represent everyone, right across the world; all who are prepared to open their eyes, hearts and minds to the new reality of 'God with us', Emmanuel, the baby boy lying in the hay, the God who makes himself vulnerable in flesh and blood, and enters into the heart of the struggles and chaos of earthly life. This Christian God is not a parochial deity, the private mascot of a particular nation or sect. Instead, the Bethlehem story tells that through Jesus, the Spirit of God came for the salvation of every nation on this troubled planet. This spiritual fact is attested by the visit of the Wise Men, who represent all those who try to help the world become wise.

Matthew is keen that, following their example, all of us should play our own part in the ongoing story. At the end of his Gospel, Matthew shows the disciples being sent out to take the good news of God's love to every nation. This is the Great Commission entrusted to us all: to spread the good news that in Christ, God's love and grace embraces all humanity.

But Matthew has another reason for including the Wise Men or Kings in his Gospel. He jolts us out of complacency by contrasting their wisdom and good will with the megalomania of King Herod. His senseless slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem reminds us that there are still people like this in the world. These people are so obsessed with power and control that they will commit terrible acts of deceit and violence to shore up their positions. Jesus was born into a frightening and barbarous world; a world of despots and desperate human beings. We have seen some of this madness and savagery in the recent events unfolding in the assassination in Iraq, and the tensions mounting in Iran, the USA, the Middle East and across the world in this New Year of 2020.

In Christ, however, we see a radically different attitude to power. In him we meet in word and deed a person who in living, dying and rising again, proclaims the good news that this world, this cosmos, is ultimately founded not upon fear and control, but on unconditional love and forgiveness: a love that fills our hearts with hope. This love has been there since the beginning, and will be there at the end of all things. It is a love that has the power to break open and heal even the stoniest hearts.

As John the Evangelist tells us in the Christmas Gospel that we heard so recently, this love is the light of the world. In keeping with this wonderful message, we recall that this world is intended to be a place of universal peace. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God intends his

kingdom in this world to haven of harmony and peace, in which violence and destruction are banished. St John further tells us, in the Book of Revelation, that when the fullness of God's kingdom is established, at the end of world history as we know it, there will be no need for sun and moon, for our hearts, minds and spiritual vision will be illuminated by the glory and love of God.

The kingdom to come may still be far indeed from realisation. In spite of this, Christians do not give up hope. We do not pack the vision of peace away when we box up the Christmas decorations. We follow the Christ-child into the world, and seek all means to build bridges and to empower those whose potential is stifled by an entitled status quo. This is the faith that Matthew brings before us. This faith enabled him to write his Gospel with courage and hope, despite the fact that his fellow Christians were being persecuted and the Roman Imperial world looked dark as night.

So let us also, like the wise men, follow the star that leads to the Prince of Peace. Christmas has now passed, and now our journeys of Epiphany, of revelation, engage us as we seek to follow the way of Christ. We are also called to take risks and make new journeys. In so doing, we bring our own gifts, offered first in worship, and then carried out into the world in the service of others. We do it with renewed courage and hope in this New Year, because in the Christ-child we have glimpsed the kingship of God.

Whatever our circumstances, whether we are 'shepherds' or 'kings', whether we weep or rejoice, whether we walk with heads held high or backs bowed low, we know that God's love holds us, and has the power to renew us and make us more loving, morally pure, generous, energised and focussed. We also have faith that God's grace and peace enfolds us in all things, making us thirst for a better world; furthermore, that through prayer, God's wisdom guides us, giving us the discernment we need to make wholesome choices for ourselves, and those whom, to God's glory, we seek to serve.