

Reflection for Epiphany

9th January 2022

In the Western churches, the Epiphany ('manifestation') became an occasion to celebrate one element in the story of Christ's birth, the visit of the far-travelled magi, understood as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the non-Jews.

Matthew's account speaks simply of 'wise men from the east'; later tradition fixed their number at three, made them kings and recalled their resonant names – Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In this perspective, Epiphany is an apt season to pray for the worldwide mission of the Church. The marking of the Conversion of St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, appropriately falls in the Epiphany season, as does the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The Epiphany season, if you look in the Common Lectionary, lasts until Lent. In the Eastern churches, the Epiphany is, rather, the celebration of Christ's baptism at the hands of John, when the heavens were opened and a voice from heaven declared Jesus to be God's beloved Son. So the season of joyful celebration that begins at Christmas now continues through the successive Sundays of Epiphany, and the festival part of the cycle ends only with the Feast of the Presentation (called Candlemas, which we've celebrated here previously as a Christingle service). The child who has been manifested to the magi at his birth is now recognized by others, when he comes to be presented in the Temple according to the Law of Israel. He is both 'a light to lighten the Gentiles' and 'the glory of God's people Israel'.

But the redemption he will bring must be won through suffering; ultimately Epiphany points our attention away from the celebration of Christmas and towards the mysteries of The Passion and Easter. Isaiah certainly saw far into the future. His opening lines today are very apt: "Arise, shine out, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord is rising on you, though night still covers the earth and darkness the peoples". Paul in his letter to the Ephesians - which we didn't hear today, but follows a similar theme - describes the immensity of God's Love in Jesus who brought salvation, freedom, redemption to all nations, all peoples for all ages, from the beginning to the end of time.

The Magi journeyed through difficult terrain, uncertain where it would lead, but felt called to come and meet Jesus and uncover hidden truths. T.S. Eliot, in the poem *Journey Of The Magi*, reflects on the difficulties they faced on their journey: ". . . then the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away, and wanting their liquor and women, and the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters, and the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly and the villages dirty and charging high prices: a hard time we had of it. At the end, we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in snatches. . . "

We, too, live in dark times amidst promises made but unable to be fulfilled. We face a virus able to disrupt and in some cases, destroy life. Just as the Magi followed the star, like them, we are invited, by struggling through the difficulties and challenges of the pandemic, to follow Jesus, our light of hope. The Magi also show us the importance of community. They supported each other on the journey, and there is a suggestion that they helped others as they journeyed towards Bethlehem. They found the treasure for which they were seeking in meeting the baby Jesus and were able to prevent him from being harmed by Herod - at least according to the popular myth.

What is so uplifting in this story is that the power and brutality of Herod was overcome by a tiny helpless baby, unable to speak, a baby filled with love and light. Among the discoveries of the Magi was that in the presence of Jesus they experienced his light shining within them - a light they went on to share with others. Their story offers us the light we need, especially today. We are able to come and celebrate communion together, to celebrate Christ, the light who gives himself to us so that we can and must be a light for those around us. We are people of hope, we are the Christmas people, we are the Magi of today shining Christ's light in the world, in the darkness and in these challenging times.

AMEN.