

SERMON for Epiphany - January 6th, 2022.

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 2: 1-12.

Today is the twelfth day of Christmas, the day that we take our Christmas decorations down. Have yours come down yet?

On this twelfth day of Christmas, we celebrate the great feast of the Epiphany - the day the Magi visit the infant Jesus. It is lovely that it falls on the day we are celebrating our monthly "mid-week" Eucharist.

While at Advent, we moved into the liturgical Year C and the year of Luke, today we have jumped out of Luke's gospel and back into Matthew.

Putting the nativity stories of Luke and Matthew side by side, they bear very little resemblance and yet rather than worry about the fact they sit awkwardly beside each other, let us celebrate that we are privileged to have both to enrich our faith.

Luke's story gives us a Jesus who came for the poor, the uneducated, the despised. In Matthew, Jesus is the fulfilment of Scripture, it is those in positions of power, the educated, the wise and the wealthy who are included. Put the two together and we see that no one is beyond God's reach, love and acceptance.

Instead of poor shepherds in Israel, Matthew writes about Magi, scholarly priests from the east.

Instead of a space for animals, Matthew takes us to King Herod's palace.

Instead of an animal's feed box, Matthew writes of gifts fit for a king. ¹

Instead of a newborn baby, we have a toddler, perhaps 3 years old, living in a house.

The visitors we hear about today: wise men / kings / magi, call them what you will, were rich scholarly men, probably followers of the Zoroastrian religion from Persia - modern day Iran.

How many of them were there who undertook the journey to Jerusalem? Tradition tries to tell us that there were three, but really, we don't know.

What we do know is that they studied the stars, they were astrologers, not like the trashy horoscope writers we know today as astrologers, their science back then was serious and respected. In their work, their studies, they believed they read the signs which indicated the birth of someone significant. So significant that they were prepared to travel into the unknown to discover what they could find.

The season of Epiphany begins with their story. Their faith. Their journey. Their epiphany!

The season of the Epiphany is all about understanding, getting a clearer / deeper understanding. The Greek word from which the word *Epiphany* comes, means *manifestation, or revelation or showing forth.* ²

During this season, we will hopefully come to a deeper understanding of the truth of the Christmas story: God, who has been born a human baby, and lives amongst us, has come to earth in order to show us God's true nature. Further, God calls us to faith and obedience. It is a good time to think about how best to share faith, and to make public the declaration of the gospel. ²

Matthew was really into fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, and we heard in our first reading, from Isaiah 60:

verse 3: "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn"

then at the end of verse 6:

They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

and in this morning's Psalm:

"The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring tribute:
the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.
All kings shall fall down before him:
and all nations do him service." [Psalm 72: 10-11; from the APBA]

Let's look at the gifts for a moment: probably the most famous gifts given to anyone in the whole world! Gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Many have theorised over what their significance was. Traditionally it has been said, gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh signifying the suffering which Jesus would know.

But even today gold is considered an international currency, accepted in most countries around the world, so it was then, and we can imagine these wise men on their journey into the unknown, carrying plenty of it.

Frankincense has always been considered as sacred, that when burnt, it helps our connection with God and therefore improves our prayer, but it also has significant healing properties. Myrrh is also used as incense, to develop spiritual awareness, but again has significant healing properties.

In an Advent study I undertook some years ago, the author, having reflected on the Magi, concluded:

It's too easy and inaccurate to see these as prophetic gifts in the sense of gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for suffering and death. They are far more than this, and each, in the way they are used are both instrumental and symbolic in the transformation of ourselves and others, and the situations we are within. Unless money, prayer and healing are used as instruments of transformation, they are not of any use at all." ³

The Magi read the sign in the star which led them out on an epic journey. It is interesting that Matthew relates following this visit, Mary and Joseph leave for their own journey into the unknown, with baby Jesus, as they leave Judea to escape King Herod's murderous rampage of the innocents.

Some wise person wrote:

People who journey without being changed are nomads. People who change without going on a journey are chameleons. People who go on a journey and are changed by the journey are pilgrims.⁴

The Magi were certainly changed by their journey. Are we nomads, chameleons or pilgrims?

In our journey through Advent and Christmas have we noticed change in our lives? As we head into Epiphany, it is my prayer that this season will deepen your faith, so that when we arrive at Lent we can truly be prepared for the great climax of our faith story.

Revd Sally Buckley
6 January 2022

REFERENCES:

1. from a Mediation for Epiphany 2010 by Val Fizzell, posted to me 02.01.2010.
2. *Epiphany in Sacred: a journey through the Church Year* by Brett Webb-Mitchell & Diane Archer.
3. "Journey with the Magi" by Keith Duke (c) 2004 published by Kevin Mayhew Ltd, Suffolk, UK. pp. 23-24.
4. Rev. Jody Seymour at Davidson United Methodist Church in North Carolina as quoted in a sermon by Fran Ota and posted on *midrash* 06.01.2013.