

Sermon

Epiphany

2.1.22

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Matthew 2: 1-12

Today this Sunday we celebrate the Epiphany - in Greek the “manifestation” - so the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people, here represented by the three Kings, or the three Wise men, or the three Magi.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew tells the familiar and long recounted story of the journey of the Magi, following the Star, visiting Herod who enquires disingenuously as to the whereabouts of the new born King so that he too can go and worship (but has murder in his heart); of the presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and of the dream that makes them return to their country by that poetic phrase, “another way” : so many paintings and depictions on Christmas cards and Christmas carols and Nativity plays with paper crowns and short, easy lines to learn for the younger members of the cast.

Matthew’s account is dripping with contextual layers: of prophecy past and future, of symbolism, but above all, of *encounter*. We have moved on from Christmas Night, the shepherds summoned to the stable, and the angels and the stall. We are a few days later, and the Christmas story, and it’s meaning has entered a new phase.

It is as if, rather like a Christmas present that we opened in all the rush and rustle and bustle and excitement of Christmas Day, we now have time in which to return. We have tidied away the wrapping paper, washed up after the last big meals, said goodbye to visiting family or friends, or returned home from being away; and we have time to pick up that present that we have left sitting on a side table because we were all too busy during Christmas in the pop and party of it all to have time to read more than the back cover, or glance at the instructions, or try it on for size but then take it off again. Now is the time that we pick that present up again, and really turn the first few pages, or read the instruction manual, or wear it, and start to appreciate it. Christmas is a funny, peculiar time: we encounter Christ in the stillness of Advent, in our expectant, tingling carol services and the first part of joyful, Christmas Day; but then, if we are celebrating with family or friends, the secular side comes centre-stage and its all about the bird and the fun; and then maybe the Boxing Day constitutional walk and snoozy reflection, and then it is New Year’s Eve.

We need to go back to where we left off, on Christmas Eve, or Christmas morning. And we do that at the feast of the Epiphany - in this encounter.

So, firstly the prophecy - the Magi, who are non-jews - are the ones to tell Herod, King of the Jews, about the Jewish prophecy of Micah and its fulfilment. It is the Magi who alert Herod to the fulfilment of the Hebrew prophecy of Micah. Micah's prophecy is that it is from minor Bethlehem, described in Micah as "one of the little clans of Judah", that will come forth the one to rule in Israel, whose origin is the from ancient days, to be born in labour, and will rule as shepherd to God's people of Israel, standing in the strength of the Lord, to be great to the ends of the earth, and shall be the one of peace. No wonder Herod freaked out. *And it was the Gentiles telling him.*

The star the Magi follow is also suggested to be trailed in the prophecy of Balaam in the Book of Numbers - where it is prophesied that a star will come out of Jacob, and a sceptre will rise out of Israel. And in our reading from Isaiah, the Lord arises, the light shines and the Nations will come to the light. All the wealth of all the world will come, shall proclaim praise, and shall bring gold and frankincense, and proclaim the praise of the Lord.

This is prophecy met real indeed.

As for our future prophecy, we know that as well as the gold and frankincense, the Magi bring with them myrrh. Myrrh we know is an aromatic spice, still harvested today; and in the Gospels of the New Testament myrrh is integral in the Crucifixion, when in John's Gospel myrrh is used to anoint the dead body of Jesus, and in Matthew and Mark myrrh appears mingled with wine as a drink to succour the dying Jesus in his agonal last moments.

So in this Epiphany, this moment, in this time of encounter, we have the attention to the detail of what Christmas means. We now have the *time and space* to look at what Christmas means. We have received the gift, and now, undistracted, we can really begin to look at it, and appreciate it: of prophecy fulfilled and time to come, and of Jesus, an infant, but encountering the real world.

In the story of the Magi we have made real that sense that in our beginnings is our end. The Magi understand the prophecies and see their fulfilment - yet they go further: they bring myrrh that has the scent of death. The Magi fulfil the past, bring the joy of the present, and anticipate the future. That is intrinsic to their encounter. They do so not as devout *Jewish* prophets, but as of the great of the *non-Jewish* world: this is a gentile encounter - that this baby, the Christ Child is for all the world. The Magi are overwhelmed with joy, and when they see the child they kneel down and pay homage. Why should they? Why should they be bothered beyond academic curiosity? The answer is because this is the Christ child for the whole world.

And, in this story of encounter we also see the worst of the human reaction to Christ. We have the best in the joy of the Epiphany, but we have the worst. The cosy, stable scene is over: it was short-lived because the reality of Christ in the world surfaces quickly. Herod's deep suspicion sparks hostility and enmity - and, shortly, the genocidal murder of the first-born. Rapidly too the Magi appreciate, by

prescience attributed to a dream, that in order to keep the child safe, they must not return to Herod. And in the next chapter of Matthew the Gospel moves straight to the flight to Egypt. This baby is now a refugee, fleeing for his life.

Christmas as we have understood it in a Christmas card sense, is over. Now we have the reality.

So, for us too, we have our true encounter with Christ. We move from the wonder of Christmas and its nativity warmth and joy, to bring ourselves too, to Christ.

It helps that we can take this time now, a week or so on, to reflect, pause and be joyful in the time and space that the season now allows. What is in our encounter with Christ? What is in our encounter with the Christ-child, prophesied long, met in knowing by the Magi, knelt before and honoured before, the good of the wealth of all the nations kneeling before Christ - what about us too?

We too take our place in our own individual *encounters*. We know too well our world that is full of enmity, unfairness, and pain. We know too well our private selves. We know that we do not, cannot, nor were meant by God to live in a permanent nativity scene. We know that the baby will grow up and become the man who will lead us to Easter. We know that this baby will offer and provide us with deep peace and also will deeply unsettle us. The stable door is open, and it was not meant to remain bolted.

Well, it is that traditional time of year for new resolutions. Most of them are short-lived and some of them are expensive. I doubt that I shall become fluent in a foreign language this year, or do my tax return early, though both would be nice - and I'll let you know how I get on.

What we can do, by way of an effective resolution, is to ask anew in this time of Epiphany, what our own individual encounter with Christ means to us. Is there something new in our relationship with God? Is there something that we would wish more for?

We often think of the gifts that the Magi bring. We sang Christina Rossetti's beautiful poem to our carol, In the Bleak Midwinter - and we sang the last verse, what would I bring him, poor as I am? In the carol, the wise men gave their part. We sang we would bring our heart.

In this Epiphany encounter I sense that that heart is all and everything that God wants from us. Just bring ourselves. We encounter God by bringing ourselves anew to God. We may do that in ways small or great, known privately only to ourselves.

Let us relish this time of encounter, and ask that the hearts we bring to God be searched out by God, that we shall find in our own ways much more than a new year resolution, but a closeness to God that we really long for, a closeness in prayer, a closeness in fellowship, a closeness to God for which we long for others,

a closeness to God for which we long for this Parish, this City, this country and, in the pressing challenges ahead his year, for this world.

At Epiphany Christ encounters the world; and so we pray, in the quiet days of January, for a renewed presence of Christ entering into our lives. We bring ourselves to God in this fresh and meaningful time of encounter, and give God all that he asks, for the chance to encounter us.

Amen

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