

Readings and Sermon for Epiphany, 3rd January 2021

Collect

O God,
who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we,
who know you now by faith,
may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Isaiah 60:1-6

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Ephesians 3.1-12

3 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2.1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise

men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon by Reverend Michelle Godbold (Rector)

So today we celebrate Epiphany, albeit a little bit early as it actually isn't until Wednesday, so you don't need to panic if your Christmas tree is still up! The church often moves the festival of Epiphany to the nearest Sunday to the actual day to allow as many people as possible to observe the festival in worship so this year we're a little early and I for one don't mind some continued and early celebration, particularly after the year we've just had!

This year, for the first time, as a family we will be celebrating epiphany in a slightly different way to the way we normally do, which usually involves adding the wise men to our nativity scene and telling the well known story of how the wise men, or the magi came to visit Jesus.

This year we will be following a different tradition, a French Epiphany tradition, La Galette des Rois. Since the 14th century, people in France have eaten the *galette des Rois* once a year. According to the tradition, the cake must be divided so that each guests gets a slice, plus an extra one called the *part du Bon Dieu/Vierge/Pauvre* (Good Lord/Virgin/Poor) which is reserved for any unexpected stranger.

The cake is typically bought in a *boulangerie*, and is made of puff pastry and *frangipane* (filling made from or flavored like almonds). A *fève* (charm) in a shape of a figurine is hidden in the cake.

When children are present, one of them (generally the youngest), must go under the table and direct whoever is serving to whom each slice should be given. The lucky one who gets the figurine becomes the king or the queen of the day, and he/she is given a golden or silver *couronne* (crown).

Whilst you may not wish to play the king or queen game for the day you might wish to have a go at making one of these cakes so I'll put a link to the simple recipe on the website, maybe to make for Wednesday.

It is a different way of doing things for us and one that hopefully will be enjoyable but then different to normal is the way we are doing most things these days.

As a church community and as a society at large we have become used to doing things differently over the last year, we've got used to having to change plans, having to adjust our expectations, having to protect ourselves and others by altering what we would normally do. We have been on an immense journey, indeed it is a journey that we are still on, and so this year I feel a special affinity with those wise men that we hear about in Matthews gospel.

The wise men with their 4 gifts set out on a journey to find a new king. They were astronomers and saw a new star rising in the east which they thought to be a sign of the birth of a new king. They set out on a journey to find him, not knowing how long it would take, not knowing which way they would go apart from that they would follow the star, not knowing what dangers they would face and what they would need to do

to stay safe and yet still they set out believing that this is what they should do. We don't hear a huge amount about their journey but we can deduce that it probably took a good amount of time, being that from their observation of the star at its rising and their arrival at the house took about two years. The gospel doesn't specifically say that it was two years but from what we are told there is every likelihood that Jesus was between 18 months and 2 years old by the time they arrived. We're told that Mary, Joseph and Jesus are now living in a house not in an animal shelter, but more importantly we can take from further on in Matthew's gospel that Herod deduced that the wise men had seen the star 2 years previously as he ordered the slaughter of all male children aged 2 and under. Also added to this there is the fact their methods of transportation at that time were certainly not as fast as what we have today and the terrain and potentially the weather conditions were probably not that forgiving either.

So it sounds like a long and uncertain journey that the wisemen embarked upon. A journey in which their expectations were called into question as they went to Herod's palace to find the new born king only to find him in a humble house, a journey in which they were forced to change direction due to a changing situation, a journey in which they had to follow expert advice from the chief priests and scribes to be able to reach their destination and they also had to use their initiative and listen to the promptings of God to ensure that they could keep the Holy Child safe by returning by a different road, they were diverted from the way which they would've preferred to go.

So much of their journey, what they had to endure, for me chimes with the journey that we have been on and are still on as we negotiate a way to our destination where we are once again able to gather together in person to worship our King Jesus.

We can learn so much from the wise men though, they carried their 4 gifts with them, they weren't deterred and they didn't give up, they didn't stop, they didn't turn back, they changed their plans, updated their expectations, they followed advice, they continued on for they believed that as long as they continued to search they would find him.

If anyone has noticed I've been getting the number of gifts the wise men carried wrong. The gifts they carried are traditionally 3 of course, gold for a king, frankincense signifying his divinity and myrrh signifying the death he would suffer. But as I look this year at this passage again I can see clearly there were 4 gifts that the wise men were carrying not three. Their fourth gift was their gift of faithfulness. Their faithful determination to seek out the Christchild, their faithful trust that they would indeed find him, their faithful exploration of all options available to them that they might be able to pay him faithful homage and faithfully offer themselves to him, their faithfulness to his life and work by changing their plans and direction so that Herod was unable to find him and he was able to fulfil his mission.

The gift of the wise men's faithfulness throughout their journey is quite easily overlooked as we focus on the material gifts they brought. And yet as we journey on together as a pilgrim people lost in these foreign circumstances we find ourselves in, we can draw strength and guidance from their example. The place we come to to worship Christ may not be the same as what we would want or expect, the way we worship may not be the same, nor the way in which we serve, but our calling is to faithfully seek, to find and to serve no matter what. And just as the wisemen, after finding Christ, had to find a way back by a different route so too our way back may be by a different route to what we expect or want but may it be one that reveals different paths and blessings and may it be one which enables the mission of God to be fulfilled. Just as the wise men may we search for answers for the way to go, in the places that we know of, but also be open to finding the answers and the Christchild in unexpected places and in places and ways that we don't know or recognise, like the wisemen may we bold and determined, trusting we will find the path which leads to him and his

glory, like the wisemen followed the sign of the star and the words of angels may we be attentive to the promptings of God and may we be ever ready to change our direction in all that we do so that his mission may be fulfilled through our action.

Amen.