

Sermon – Sunday 6th January 2019 – 9.30 am

I always get the feeling that St. Paul knew the meaning of the word Epiphany. If we're talking about a moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation, I expect most of us couldn't top St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. A Pharisee, zealous in his persecution of those who were becoming followers of The Way, as those early Christians were known, Paul – or Saul as he was then – oversaw the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. So I think it's fair to say it was probably quite a shock when, heading to Damascus, a light from heaven flashed around him and, falling to the ground, he had an encounter with Jesus. Such a shock, in fact, that Paul became an ardent follower of Jesus. A significant part of the New Testament includes some of his correspondence with those churches he helped set up around the eastern Mediterranean.

That moment of revelation was clearly life-changing for Paul, transforming the course of his life. And yet I think it is fair to say that when Paul became a follower of Jesus in that moment on the road to Damascus, he probably didn't know exactly what he was letting himself in for. I don't know whether you are a person who embraces change, or someone who would rather avoid it if at all possible, but we all know that in the twists and turns of our lives, when we make changes, big and small, we are never fully aware of all the consequences.

The story of the Epiphany, which we celebrate this morning, appears in only one of the four gospels. It was only Matthew who told of these foreigners, gentiles, referred to as Magi, or as we translate it "Wise Men", who followed the star to find the Christ child in Bethlehem. The story is laden with significance. Here, right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, we are confronted with the truth that God's love extends to everyone – rich and poor, Jew and gentile, friend and stranger. Since Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience, we can already sense the significance of this message.

But that isn't all. It is the Magi who form the catalyst for a series of significant events which continue to reveal the identity of Jesus. First they identify him as a King because they know that the star that they are following will lead to a King. But unsurprisingly this revelation isn't welcome in every quarter. Herod is frightened. He's the King, after all, and has no intention of relinquishing his authority. And then the Magi receive their warning in a dream not to return to Herod to advise him of the child's exact location. So he decides to act to remove the threat by killing all the children less than two years old in and around Bethlehem. When Joseph is warned of the danger, also through a dream, then Mary, Joseph and Jesus escape to Egypt. From the outset, therefore, the Epiphany had a meaning which embraced both a moment of revelation, and the subsequent consequences of that revelation – the flight into Egypt and massacre of the innocents, to name but two, each of which begin to show Jesus's identity as the new Moses and the one who will fulfil the scriptures.

There is a strange paradox in the way we celebrate Epiphany on this Sunday each year. Because if an Epiphany is a moment of sudden and great revelation, surely it doesn't make sense that it comes around like clockwork every year. But I wonder whether this kind of repetition and ritual is actually very important indeed.

Something that has really got me thinking this year is imagining what happened to the Magi after the events described in Matthew's gospel. When in the book of Acts we read about Saul's revelation on the road to Damascus, we then hear about the consequences, the ways it transformed his life – not least in taking on the name Paul. But the Magi disappear from our sight. This is the Epiphany, and yet what next? Some of you will be familiar with TS Eliot's extraordinary poem, the Journey of the Magi,

which hints at the ways their lives may have been changed, no longer content with a lavish lifestyle in the Orient. But for the Gospel writers this is not an Epiphany for the Magi, but rather for the whole of humankind.

There are times that I find myself wanting the certainty of an Epiphany – wanting to believe that there are paths of faith that do not involve doubt, questioning, internal – and perhaps eternal – challenge. But I wonder whether that is to miss the point. The revelation of the Christ child as God incarnate was neither the beginning nor the end. It was a moment in time that led to transformation. And one of the ways that we allow that transformation to continue is to retell the story by celebrating Christmas each year. And the same is true for Epiphany.

When I think of the times I have seen those “lightbulb” moments of realisation in people I have known, I am struck by how often they have been the result of simply reflecting back at someone what they have already described. There can often be something about the telling of a story, reflecting on it together and telling it again that provides the shape and meaning, revealing a greater depth of understanding.

Part of the point of moments of revelation – our own, and those described to us by other people – is that they can provide anchor points. They are our reminders, they hold us more securely at those times when things feel less sure. We don’t know when the story of the Epiphany was first told, but it is hard to imagine that it did not shape the lives of those who told it. The story was told in the first place because of its significance; because it had a deep meaning. But its meaning no doubt developed through the telling.

And the story continues. We continue to hear and tell the story of the Epiphany, and to hear it afresh each year. Our experiences shape our understanding, and new things are revealed. I wonder what the story is revealing to you this year, how your understanding of the Christ child in Bethlehem is being shaped?

If the newspapers and gossip magazines are to be believed, New Year is a time for making big changes. But I wonder if the story of the Epiphany is telling us something different. Whether it is reminding us that the road of transformation is one that we live out daily. That there are moments of revelation that we hold onto tightly and that we might seek to recall, especially in harder times. That it is a road we never walk alone because we are always accompanied by a God who loves us.

Amen