

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 3rd January 2021
Epiphany

Collect

Creator of the heavens,
who led the Magi by a star
to worship the Christ-child:
guide and sustain us,
that we may find our journey's end
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift 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.
Then 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.
A 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.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, '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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
"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.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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.’ When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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The Journey of the Magi by TS Eliot

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
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,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Sermon

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. If you look up the word “epiphany” you will find a range of definitions. One, for example, is “a moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation.” Or how about this: “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something.”

The two definitions may not sound so very different, but there is something about the identification in the second that the discovery is of something around essential nature and meaning that feels very important.

One of the things that I have often reflected upon in my faith journey, and most especially as I have shared my story with others, and in turn listened to their stories, is the way in which some people are able to describe dazzling moments of enlightenment while others can't. Each year when we listen to the story of St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, some can identify similarly life-changing moments and some cannot.

What is undoubtedly true of those training for ordination, and indeed of many faithful Christians, is that, while we cannot always point to a sudden or great revelation, we can probably all recognise ways in which we have come to understand things differently. Ways in which we have grown to observe and notice the ways in which God may be at work in the world. Ways in which our understanding of ultimate meaning has deepened.

The feast of the Epiphany marks the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus shortly after his birth. Only Matthew's gospel describes the event, and we hear that, during the time of King Herod, wise men came from the East, seeking to pay homage to the one born King of the Jews.

Much of the story tells us more of King Herod's fear, and his desire to use the wise men to find the infant and do away with him, seeing him as a threat to his power, than it does about the revelation to the wise men. The wise men themselves seem to be sensitive and observant souls. Somehow they have heard about the birth of Jesus, and with their knowledge of the stars, they feel able to track him down, following the star of Bethlehem. They bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; gifts fit for a King, yet also appearing to recognise something of the life this child will live. And, when told in a dream not to return to King Herod, they obey.

Some of you may have come across TS Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, in which Eliot narrates the story of the wise men's journey. It is, of course, a work of the imagination. He tells the story as though it is being recounted many years later. He identifies the challenges of the journey itself, making it sound anything but glamorous. And then, when the magi arrive at the stable, Eliot's simple description is:

“And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.”

What I love about this is the understatement. No excitement at finding the baby. Nothing about being able to present gifts. No description of the scene, or Mary and Joseph. What is also fascinating, is that in this very understatement, it is hard to see this as a moment of revelation.

And yet, as TS Eliot goes on to say, there has been an epiphany. Because, speaking so many years later, the magi recognise that their life was indeed changed in this moment. Having enjoyed the luxury of life in their eastern palaces, their eyes were opened, and they could never experience that privilege in the same way again. They came to recognise the fine line between life and death, and that the good news does not insulate us from human suffering, but is rather a promise of God's presence.

Whatever was the real experience of the magi, we will never know. Yet in his work of imagination, Eliot gives us an insight into the unexpected ways revelation can happen. And its unexpected consequences. In reading the poem, it seems that if the magi wanted an easy and indeed comfortable life, they would have been better off staying at home. Yet that would have insulated them from reality and truth.

Over the last ten months there have been those who have sought to make some sense of living through a global pandemic. No doubt this will continue. I wonder how many of us long for a moment of revelation to help us to understand how this time will change us – and whether it will change us for the better.

I wonder whether the journey of the magi – and perhaps especially TS Eliot's take on it – might help us just a little. Probably none of us would have seen ourselves as enjoying an especially privileged life before the pandemic – the life TS Eliot imagines for the magi of:

“The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.”

Yet perhaps for some of us there is something to learn and discover from the change of perspective that the pandemic has brought.

To be clear, I am not saying that God sent the pandemic to teach us something. Neither am I saying that any of us would have chosen the year we have just had. And neither am I trying to ignore the pain and loss that has taken place by “looking on the bright side.”

What TS Eliot appears to suggest about the magi is that their lives were changed by visiting Jesus. They didn't become more comfortable, but they saw something deeper and more truthful in the infant in the manger. And perhaps we, too, can recognise where we have experienced something deeper and more truthful in having our lives disrupted; our plans put on hold or cancelled altogether. Perhaps we see things a little differently than we did before. Perhaps we have even discovered an empathy with others that has surprised us.

It is too early to really know the consequences of this pandemic. Yet in each choice we make along the way, we are shaping those consequences. Imperceptibly perhaps, but shaping them nevertheless.

Perhaps what we might hope for this epiphany is that by gazing intently on the infant Jesus, the ways in which we respond will be part of making a positive difference. And that we might grow closer to the truth that is in Christ.

Amen