

Epiphany
5/1/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

The Epiphany of our Lord

Sermon preached by Andrew Gador-Whyte

Today we are marking the Epiphany of our Lord. We celebrate the coming of the wise men paying homage to the infant they recognise as king.

We celebrate the revealing in Jesus of God's inclusion of the Gentiles, *all* of us, in his saving work.

And we look forward to the coming restoration of all humanity and the whole cosmos in the reconciling death and life of Jesus Christ.

What has been revealed at epiphany is the purpose behind the life of all human cultures and indeed animals and the whole creation – participation in the life of God through Christ, Christ who is the unifying principle and radical generosity within and behind all created things.

In recounting the coming of the Gentiles to worship their infant Lord, Matthew is drawing on the rich prophetic imagery we have heard in the Old Testament today.

Isaiah and the psalmist proclaimed that exile will end, and the integrity of the nation and its families will be restored. In former times, Judah's kings were humiliated before the violence of Babylon. But soon the nations will recognise in Judah their true centre, the epitome of human flourishing.

By God's faithfulness, the roles will be reversed, and the kings of the Gentiles will fall before the king of Judah. But although Isaiah's image is one of an imperial capital, it represents instead a *reconciling* power exercised in the world. This power will *above all* be for the restoration of the life of the poor and weak. A restoration beyond the violence that seems so intrinsic to the world and the exercise of power.

All of humanity, and particularly those in authority, will be transformed by obedience to the one reigning with the authority of this reconciling God. Judah's king will act in a way that is recognisably *authoritative* in the true sense, that is, oriented in service towards reconciliation. Think of the spontaneous cry of the crowd in Mark's gospel as Jesus begins his ministry – '*A new teaching – with authority*'.

God's reconciling authority will be revealed to the nations through his people, and particularly through one who will act among God's people with *justice*. This justice flows from receiving it as a *gift* to be worked out in the world through human integrity.

The coming of the wise men inaugurates the streaming of the nations to Jerusalem. Their homage before Jesus initiates the movement of those outside the Jewish nation now into obedience to the Promise. They herald the establishment of the Church as a wild olive tree now grafted into the Promise, now fellow heirs along with our brothers and sisters, the Jews.

Who are the wise men? There is a tradition of their being kings – for us, perhaps politicians, academics, other powerful shapers of public discourse. They are astrologers, possibly even sinister workers of magic. They are clearly not Jews. Yet these foreign, powerful, even shadowy figures have nonetheless become a means by which God discloses his reconciliation of all nations in Christ. God works through their human integrity and wisdom. Through their recognition, God makes them a source of revelation to the Gentiles.

But even more strangely, the movement of the comets and stars have themselves become a means of revelation. Time itself has not been left unchanged. With the coming of Jesus, no longer do the movements of celestial bodies *dictate fate*. Rather, their movements have become from now on movements of *praise*.

Time is now marked by the movements of the higher creation in praise of the Lord revealed at the heart of creation. So epiphany is the revelation that the whole universe has been invited into a new obedience to God in Christ.

Here God's eternal purpose is unveiled, that all nations will find themselves included in obedience to God in Christ. But this is even more cosmic. The powers under which the universe labours, the authorities and forces which govern the world, will come to find their true purpose in obedience to Christ.

By the power of the Spirit, the Church will become a means by which God makes his will clear to all humanity. By its own obedience, the Church is to lead the nations and – startlingly – all of creation into obedience to Christ.

Matthew hints at a shift in the wise men. In searching for the anointed one, they go first to the place where authority is most visibly and brutally expressed, to Herod's Jerusalem. But afterwards, they return by another road. They have been met by the authority of the Child, which upsets the violent balance of authority as we understand it.

TS Eliot imagined the return of wise men to their own country in this way – *'we were led all that way for Birth or Death?... 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...'*

In our times when for many the economic and social balance seems hopelessly tilted against them, there is an understandable desire for politicians who will at least *upset* that balance. The terrifying rise of racist and authoritarian governments is in part an indictment on the way progressive politics have often become distant from the needs of the disadvantaged. And to our shame Christians have often been complicit either in political elitism or in this impulse towards authoritarian, exclusionary, insular politics.

In these times, the Church must allow itself to be transformed by the feast of the epiphany. Our liturgical life, our life of prayer, is meant to bring us more and more deeply into unease in the 'old dispensation'. Our life of worship and prayer, our living out of our baptism, is a slow birth out of a slow death.

Our life together in the Church is a slow dying to the violent patterns of authority that run through all our relationships and interior lives. And it is a life where, by the grace of God, the strong and the powerful grow into solidarity with the weak, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged; a life where a new unity is possible and where the lip-service of mixed economies is replaced by the radical equality of God's coming kingdom.

The Church must be renewed in obedience to the Prince of Peace. Our urgent task – in our worship and our engagement in our national life – is to hasten to the feed-trough, where we lay the whole of our lives before the Christ Child.

And this urgent task is from beginning to end an act of joy – joy at the coming of Jesus into *this* world, *this* tangled web, *these* relationships, *this* crisis. Joy at the humanity of God who remains in our midst in *this* world. Joy *against* the crushing pessimism of our times, joy *against* the fearful exclusion of the stranger. Joy that persists in proclaiming that in Christ now nothing can separate my neighbour, my enemy, from life and communion.

We must allow our lives to be reordered from being the definers of our own fate, to become an act of praise. We must allow our lives to become a star pointing the nations towards Bethlehem, an invitation into the joy of obedience – just as we trust we are being renewed along with all of creation.

By the grace of God, may our lives become a constant invitation to kneel before the one who became poor, weak and vulnerable, in being born among us – the one who chose the cross as his throne.

The crucified and risen one, the Christ Child –

 he it is who rules with the authority that is healing;

 the one who arises as the dawn,

 making our dark cities shine with their coming restoration;

 the one whose body we are in the world. Amen.
