

## **Sermon 6 January Epiphany**

**Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:1-12 Matthew 2:1-12**

Today is Epiphany Sunday. What is an epiphany? It is a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or become conscious of something that is very important to you. It is often used in the context of a powerful religious experience, that is because the word has been used to describe the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. Epiphany in Greek means *manifestation*.

Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas with January 6<sup>th</sup> marking the official end to the festive season. So down with those Christmas trees! In the Anglican church, as with many Protestant churches, the Epiphany season lasts up until Ash Wednesday.

So Epiphany commemorates the coming of the Magi to pay homage to the infant Jesus. Before we look at a couple of points relevant to this visit, let's spend a moment reflecting on Herod. A very interesting character. He was called Herod the Great, and in many ways he deserved the title. He was the only ruler of Palestine who ever succeeded in keeping the peace. He was a great builder – he was indeed the builder of the Temple in Jerusalem. He could be generous. In times of difficulty he cancelled taxes to make things easier for the people. In the famine of 25 BC he was reputed to have melted down his own gold plates to buy corn for the starving people. However, to say Herod was paranoid about any perceived threat to his power would be an understatement. He was insanely suspicious. He has always been suspicious, and the older he became, the more suspicious he grew. If he suspected anyone as a rival to his power, that person was promptly eliminated. These persons included his wife and her mother, his eldest son and two other sons. He was undoubtedly the consummate family man. So it is no wonder he reacted the way he did when news reached him that a child was born who was destined to be king.

Anyway, enough of Herod. I want to draw attention to two important points about the visit of the Magi. Firstly, the Magi were not Jewish. They came under the broad heading of Gentiles given by the Jews to anyone who wasn't a Jew. Why is this important?

The point is, apart from the shepherds, and they weren't really accepted by the Jewish establishment, the Magi were the first people to pay homage to Jesus. The message here is that the

ministry of Jesus is for everyone. Jesus was born a Jew and he worshipped as a Jew. He was accepted by so many as the long-awaited Messiah, but his Messiahship was not just for the Jews; it was for anyone who accepted him.

There are hints in the Old Testament of the universal ministry of the Messiah. Isaiah promised that the Messiah would be a covenant to the people and a light to the nations. In our first reading, he says, *'All nations will come to your light.'*

We also heard Paul make the point in his letter to the Ephesians that the gospel of Christ is for Gentiles as well as for Jews. *'The Gentiles have an equal share with the Jews in all the riches inherited by God's children. Both groups have believed the Good News, and both are part of the same body and enjoy together the promise and blessings through Jesus Christ.'* Ephesians 3:6

The second point is that the Magi were guided by a light, a very bright star. It was a bright light that led them to the birthplace of this person who himself was going to be a light to the world. What a wonderfully positive word *light* is. We talk about someone or something being a guiding light, a leading light, a light in the darkness, someone's face lighting up. Children invariably like to have a light on at night as it gives them a sense of comfort in the dark.

In my sermon on Christmas Day, I alluded to the fact that Jesus used the metaphor of light to describe himself. *'I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.'* What a powerful image that is. And we have just heard Isaiah's prophesy, *'All nations shall come to your light.'* So what is the message here for us? Simply, we take this issue of light and we apply it to ourselves. That is the challenge. To be a light for others, to light up the darkness for others, to be a guiding light for others. We can do it. We don't have to be a Messiah. We just use a little kindness, a little generosity, a little love and we can be that light.

This brings me to the point I want to end on. This week is the beginning of another year. I am excited about the challenges that lie ahead. I am excited about the possibilities for our church. I am excited about the challenge Jesus gives us to be a light to others. But, and it is quite a big *but*, in order to do that, it is important that we step a little bit outside our comfort zone as we reach out to our community. It is important that we share something of what we have and/or something of ourselves if we are to grow and if we are to meet that challenge of being a light for others. Let me finish with a story.

*Once upon a time there was a fish who lived in a stagnant pool. Breathing was so difficult that it was fast becoming a desperate situation. He decided to call his friends together and brave the unknown to find more liveable waters. Their journey was not easy but in the end they were successful when they chanced upon a gently flowing brook. 'This is where we must make our home', said the fish. 'And to make sure that we do not lose what we have found, we must safeguard it.'*

*Together they found enough materials and debris to make a carefully closed-in compound for themselves. 'What we have now is safe, they exclaimed.'*

*Unfortunately, they had boxed themselves in far too well, so that in the end they all died from lack of oxygen.*

Now, I am not suggesting for one moment that here at St Paul's we are stagnant. Heaven forbid! But if we are to do justice to ourselves as disciples of Christ, if we are to do justice to ourselves as a church that accepts the challenge to be a guiding light in our community, then we cannot be a closed community ourselves, but rather we need to reach out beyond our walls, our confines in order to touch the lives of as many people as possible. That should be our mission for 2019. May God bless us as we look ahead to what I am sure will be an exciting year.

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