

Epiphany 2018 : New hope in the face of suffering and the revelation of Christ to the world

Sermon preached at All Saints' church, Nottingham by Rev Christopher Harrison

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, transferred from yesterday, 6th January, the 12th day of Christmas. But before we look more closely at the meaning of this feast day, I want to ask you: how was the Christmas season was for you? Busy? Quiet? Sad? Memorable? or not so memorable? Or was it even one of those days when things didn't go quite right; or even when everything went horribly wrong? Someone forgot to defrost the turkey fully, perhaps? Or maybe you forgot to telephone an important family member to wish them a Happy Christmas? Or you had some people round for something to eat and forgot that someone was a vegetarian?

We've just heard the familiar story of the visit of the three wise men from the East, magi, Kings, to the baby Jesus and his family. When we think of the wise men, we probably have a Christmas crib picture in our mind, with the wise men offering their gifts to the baby Jesus. But it's easy to forget that in one way in particular the visit of the three wise men went horribly wrong. Remember how the wise men asked advice from King Herod about where they might find the new king who had been born – for, as they said, they had seen his star, and knew, from ancient prophecies, that a king was to be born in Bethlehem. They had not realised that Herod would see the birth of a new king as a threat to himself, and that he would therefore slaughter all the baby boys in the region, for fear that one of them would grow up to take his place as king.

We can easily forget that Jesus grew up in a land where brutality and violence were common, where kings and rulers often stopped at nothing to remain in power. We can only with difficulty imagine the grief and desolation of those parents whose babies were massacred on the whim of a paranoid tyrant. And of course this would have been a burden for the wise men to bear for the rest of their lives: the knowledge that their mistake, in going to ask Herod where the new king had been born, set in motion the killing of many innocent children.

We tend, understandably, not to focus on the actions of the wicked king Herod, but to think more about the mysterious men from the east who came to pay homage to Jesus, even though

they were from a totally different country and religion. There were two ways in particular in which those men made contributions to the shape of the Christian faith which was to arise from the birth of Jesus:

- First, they seemed to know three things about who Jesus was going to be, and these things were symbolised in the gifts they brought: gold for a king, frankincense for one who was from God, and myrrh, a perfume used at burial foreshadowing Jesus' death on the cross for the sins of the world.
- Secondly, the magi were the first non-Jews, as far as we know, to visit and worship Jesus. In doing this they foreshadowed the eventual opening up of the Christian faith to all nations, not just the Jewish people amongst whom Jesus had been born. This is why we use the word 'Epiphany' to describe this feast: it means revelation, or showing: the revelation of Christ to the nations of the world.

Nothing will have been able to take away the sadness of those who lost their children as a result of Herod's wrath. Our memory of the massacre of the innocents is bound to affect the way we remember the visit of the wise men and our celebration of Epiphany. The world has always been, for many, a violent and dangerous place, where some people will stop at nothing to get what they want: just think of Syria and other areas of the Middle East in recent years, as well as other countries where the powerful live by the rule of war rather than the rule of law. Massacres are an all-too-frequent feature of modern warfare, in which the life of no-one seems to be sacrosanct. There will probably always be people, just as in the time of Jesus, who will seek to impose their will on others by means of force and fear, in societies where life is cheap and human rights a luxury which can all too easily be discarded.

In spite of all this, however, we must not allow the sadness and suffering which are never far away in today's world to prevail over the Epiphany message of new light in places of darkness and fresh hope for the downcast and demoralised. For the coming of the Christ child was, is, and always will be a sign of hope: hope that in our often dangerous and hostile world there is a new, better way of living, one which Christians believe is a higher and more noble way. This is the way of living which Christ came to show: the way of service and self-giving, of love and compassion. Of not seeking revenge but of seeking to build a better society, of helping people

to turn from evil and to do good. The baby in a manger is an image of weakness, of vulnerability, of a life which it would have been so easy for Herod to extinguish if he had succeeded in finding the infant Jesus. But the message of the coming to earth of Christ as a baby is also that in him, God shows that all that was embodied even in his weakness and vulnerability will ultimately do far more to bring the world closer to the kingdom of God than bullets, bombs, intimidation and any attempt to rule by means of fear.

Finally, let's not forget those gifts brought to the baby Jesus by the magi who somehow knew who he was and who he was going to become: Gold, frankincense and myrrh: gold for a king, frankincense for a God, myrrh presaging his eventual death. When all seems to be shrouded in sadness and futility, when we ask ourselves why some people seem to suffer so much, let us remember afresh that God gave his very Son to us and to the whole world, so that evil will never have the final victory. For we must never forget that amidst all the depressing and disheartening examples of inhumanity, devastation and sorrow in our world, there are also many other examples of goodness, hope, kindness, and mercy; quite often ignored by the media; but all of which remind us that the new light which we celebrate through the coming of Christ has not gone out, and will never do so, however hard some people may try to extinguish that light. Amen.