

Readings for Epiphany Sunday

8th January 2022

First Reading: 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.

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:1-12

I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the

rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Gospel: St 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.

A Reflection for Epiphany

Some years ago, I had the good fortune to be in Assisi, at Epiphany. In Italy, there is a tradition of Befana, an old woman on a broomstick, bringing presents to children on the eve of Epiphany. In Assisi, on the evening of 5th January, someone dressed as Befana abseils from one of the church towers throwing sweets to the excited children below as she descends. For those of us not used to it, it is an extraordinary sight and one for which the connection to Epiphany is not immediately apparent. However, there are various legends that link her to the wise men, suggesting that she was visited by them on their journey to see Jesus but declined to go with them. She later changed her mind and has been visiting children bringing gifts ever since in her search for the baby Jesus.

This is just one example of the different traditions and timings for Christmas gift-giving that exist across the world, traditions that have developed and changed over the centuries. As Christians, we associate the giving of gifts with the gifts of the wise men to the infant Jesus at Epiphany and, in some countries, this is the day on which gifts are given. However, the tradition of gift-giving in midwinter (in the northern hemisphere) stems from pre-Christian times. The Romans exchanged gifts as they celebrated the festival of Saturnalia around the winter solstice, when thanks were given to Saturn, the god of agriculture, for the bounty of the earth.

As was not uncommon, this pagan custom was adopted into Christianity by the church. This adoption may also have been influenced by the life of St Nicholas, 4th century bishop of Myra, renowned for his generosity, often giving in secret and especially to children, and now immortalised as Santa Claus. So it is that in many countries in northern Europe, gifts, particularly those to children, are given around the feast of St Nicholas on 6th December.

In pre-Reformation Britain, gifts were usually given at New Year, and some mediaeval English monarchs are reported to have used this tradition to force their subjects to make gifts to them as a form of taxation.

Rather more morally satisfying is the widespread European tradition of giving gifts to the poor on St Stephen's Day, 26th December – perhaps linked with the story of Good King Wenceslaus, a 10th century king of Bohemia known for his generosity to the poor. In Britain, gifts to servants and to the poor at this time of year can be traced back at least to the 13th century.

Whatever the origin of our gift-giving traditions at Christmas, the linking of these traditions with the gifts of the wise men is worthy of our attention. As with most of the stories of Jesus birth, there is so much that we don't know about the wise men – even though tradition and legend has filled many of the gaps. Matthew's Gospel doesn't give many details. We don't know how many wise men there were. We don't know where they were from except 'the East'. We don't know how long their journey took them. There are a number of indications that their visit took place some time after Jesus' birth, maybe up to two years later. Jesus is referred to as a child rather than a baby, the Holy Family were visited in a house not a stable, and Herod's plan to dispose of a rival king involved the murder of children who were two years old or under. However, one the few things that Matthew does tell us about the wise men, which is therefore of significance, is that they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The symbolism of these gifts was described by Origen of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian of the 3rd century: gold for a king, frankincense for God, and myrrh, used in embalming ointments, indicating mortality. As we remember in the familiar words of the carol *We Three Kings*, the gifts revealed Jesus' identity as King of Kings, as God, and that he would die for the world. And, as is important in Matthew's Gospel, gold and frankincense fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

The giving of gifts has assumed huge importance in our Christmas celebrations, perhaps too great an importance it could be argued. But gifts to those we love, and gifts to those that are in need, will always be important because they also reflect the gift that God gave to the world which he loved and was in need. The greatest of all gifts is God's gift to us of the Christ-child.

That the gift of the Christ-child is for all people is shown in each of our readings for Epiphany. Isaiah says 'Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn', perhaps also a reference to the wise men or kings coming after Jesus' birth. Paul, in the passage from his letter to the Ephesians, speaks of the Gentiles as 'fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus'. Matthew's Gospel account of the visit of the wise men record it as being in Bethlehem, another fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and signifying his importance as Messiah to the Jewish people. The presence of the wise men, themselves foreigners, extends the promises of God to other peoples.

God's gift is for all people. As I said at Christmas, our choice is in how we respond. We are now a week into the new year, a time of resolutions, of new beginnings with good intentions to change our ways for the better. Should our resolutions this year show a greater reflection of our commitment to God and our response to God's gift?

One of the responses of the wise men was to 'pay homage' to the young Jesus. 'Paying homage' isn't really a phrase we use much in the 21st century so what might it mean for us? 'Paying homage' has overtones of worship and reverence, of honouring someone with our attention, perhaps of acknowledging our dependence on them. These are all things that we associate with our relationship with Jesus and yet there is always the temptation to look away, and to be drawn away by the cares and apparent securities of the world. Epiphany is about the revelation of God in Jesus, so perhaps this is a reminder to be alert to where God is revealing himself, to where God is at work in the world around us, and to try to honour God by trying to work with him?

The wise men responded by presenting gifts to Jesus. We offer gifts to one another and to those in need, but what gifts do we offer God? Offering our money, our time and our talents to God are all important. But, as Christina Rossetti identified in the last verse of her poem, *In the bleak mid-winter*, there is one gift God longs for above all:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.

And finally, the wise men responded by going home by another road to avoid returning to Herod, a decision that gave the Holy Family time to escape Herod's wrath. As we think about our response to God, are there areas of our lives where a different direction might be a good idea? Is there another road we should be choosing?