

Readings for Epiphany Sunday

7th January 2024

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

Each year, at Epiphany, my thoughts turn to T.S. Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi* (it is copyright but it can be found here: <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/journey-magi/>). It is often read at this time of year, or perhaps more often now at Christmas, and I am sure that many of you are familiar with it. It is written as an account by one of the wise men looking back on his experience from many years later. When we come to Epiphany, we tend to focus on the celebration, the wonder (we sing *O star of wonder, star of light, star of royal beauty bright...*), the magnificence and symbolism of the gifts. But Eliot's poem has none of the things we associate with the visit of the wise men; there is no mention of a star, or of gifts, or even the name of Jesus.

The opening words of the poem are only a slight adaptation of some words of the Bishop and theologian, Lancelot Andrewes, from a 1622 nativity sermon in which he speculated on the difficulties that must have been faced by the wise men on their journey to Bethlehem. The journey envisaged is arduous and difficult: it begins 'A cold coming we had of it...', and later 'A hard time we had of it.' It is characterised by cold and discomfort, recalcitrant camels and unreliable camel handlers, lack of shelter, passing through hostile and unfriendly places, with regret at leaving luxury behind, and creeping doubt.

Then the wise men arrive at their destination, a more pleasant scene, 'a temperate valley' with streams and trees and a tavern. But this scene is also full of images that symbolise Jesus' future ministry and death. The running stream reminds us that Jesus is the living water; the 'three trees on the low sky' represent the three crosses at Calvary; the vine leaves that Jesus is the true vine. There are those 'dicing for pieces of silver' reminding us that Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and also that the soldiers cast lots for his clothing; and the wineskins remind us of the parable and the need to put new wine into fresh wineskins. There is also a glimpse beyond Calvary to the end of time: the white horse symbolises the apocalypse whose rider wears a crown and will conquer all. The wise men travel through this valley until, at evening, they reach their destination and we are given to understand that they meet with Jesus. But this encounter seems very understated: 'it was (you may say) satisfactory'.

The last section of the poem speaks of the impact the encounter had on the wise man speaking here. Despite the arduousness of the journey, he would do it again. There is the recognition that what he saw went beyond the immediate birth of a child to the death that it foretold. And also his own death to the life that he had lived before. He says that they were changed by the encounter, yet had to return to their kingdoms which had become like foreign places to them: '...an alien people clutching their gods.', and so he is left longing for another death.

For Eliot, the Biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus raised questions about how fully the true significance of Jesus' birth was revealed to those who witnessed it or who, like the wise men, came soon after. Did Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, even Herod, realise the huge importance of the events of which they were part? Perhaps not at the time. We all know that hindsight is a wonderful thing. But, as the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection unfolded, so their significance would have become increasingly apparent, something we also see in the history of the early church.

Eliot described this poem as a metaphor for the spiritual journey we must all make if we are to fully experience Christ in our lives. His own search for spiritual meaning was long and, at the time that he wrote this poem, he was a recent convert to Anglicanism. But this was not a cosy, comfortable option, a settling down as some of his friends suggested; rather it was the beginning of an ongoing journey without an easy conclusion, like the wise men in the poem.

The arduousness of their journey reflects the challenges we all face when we choose to follow Christ. The wise men are portrayed as having a pretty good life before, a life of ease, yet they were moved to make their journey. For all of us, the journey we make to Jesus is a move from our old life to a new life of faith. Like any significant change for the better, whether for us as individuals or for society more generally, there are difficulties to overcome but they prepare us for the new, what is to come. In the poem, the wise man's encounter with Jesus may initially appear as something of an anticlimax: 'it was (as you may say) satisfactory', but Eliot's use of language is subtle. It takes on a different hue when we remember that Jesus is the one who satisfies all our heart's desires and all our needs. Jesus is entirely satisfactory, the one who satisfies completely and in whom we can find perfect peace despite the noise of the world around us.

The wise man of the poem has met both birth and death. The birth of Christ signifies a new beginning, the start of a new order of things, and also an end, a death, to the old ways of living. He is no longer comfortable in the world he once knew, and so he longs for another death, for full transformation into God's kingdom. Wherever we are on our Christian journey, we too live in this in-between place, part of the world and called to serve it, yet not conformed to its values and longing for the time when all will be renewed in the coming of God's kingdom.

At Epiphany, in the coming of the wise men, we are reminded that Jesus came as the light of the world for all nations, all people; not just for Jews, not just for Christians but for all the world. And the light that he brought, that Isaiah announced, is needed as much as ever in a world where so much is dark and discouraging. And that is our task as God's people today – to shine a light on things that are wrong, to challenge complacency, to speak up for those whose voice cannot be heard. Difficult, yes, but essential. In an election year, particularly, we need to do all in our power to make our politicians sit up and take notice that, as our representatives, they have a moral duty to act to counter the unspeakable horrors taking place in parts of the world.

I would like to leave you with some words of The Very Rev'd Canon Richard Sewell, Dean of St George's College Jerusalem, published in the Christmas edition of the *Church Times*. To me, they speak of the hope of our faith and also of the call on us to engage with the world, to bring that Light.

'The great mystery of the incarnation is that God enters into the mess, pain and complexity of our lives, as well as its joys and rewards. God does not simply reign from heaven in splendid isolation; God decisively engages with the material, and this forms the basis of all Christian hope: God is with us.

This Christmas ... we are also reminded that God cannot be contained by churches ... in a cloak of detached holiness. God is to be found in a truly vulnerable Jesus among the flotsam and jetsam of terrifying bombing campaign.

... I sincerely hope that ... congregations around the world will pray for a real and lasting peace, so that all people ... will find a way to live in peace with justice.'