

Readings for Epiphany Sunday

5th 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

Novelty socks are a traditional Christmas present are they not? – especially for those we for whom we have no idea what else to get. Last Christmas, not the one just past but the one before, I was given a pair of Holy socks which I rather like. (That's 'Holy' with no 'e' – no holes.) Holy socks are novelty gifts that can sometimes be found in places like Cathedral gift shops – and I'm pretty certain that's where mine came from. There are lots of different designs illustrating characters or stories from the Bible, and the reason I am speaking about them today is that my socks are Epiphany socks, complete with star and some rather surprised-looking camels.

Each pair of Holy Socks comes with a card in the packet containing a story or poem, or both, relating to the design on the socks. My pair came with a delightful camel's-eye view of the story we've just hear in our Gospel reading, of the wise men coming to visit the infant Jesus. I would love to read it to you as it came with my socks, but I don't have permission from the copyright holder, and, since a version of this reflection will end up on our website, I'd better not do so.

Of course, although camels are often depicted with the wise men in illustrations of this story, the Bible doesn't mention how they travelled. In fact the Biblical text tells us very little about them. We don't know who they were

or where they were from, except 'the East'. We don't know how many of them there were, or even if they travelled together. Some of these gaps were filled by legends about the wise men which grew up around the Biblical account and other texts, helped by prophecies such as that we have today from Isaiah, that people would come from afar with gold and frankincense... and camels!

We can deduce that the wise men were attentive to detail and curious – they spotted an unusual star and followed it, embarking on a journey which led to an Epiphany, a revelation of God's presence in the world. Or perhaps we should say 'another Epiphany'. The first revelation of the infant Jesus was to the shepherds, regarded as some of the lowest in that society, and now a second revelation to the wise men, somewhat exotic foreigners. Both revelations to unlikely people, in an unusual place and in challenging circumstances.

One might think that God would choose ideal circumstances for the birth of God's son, but not much about Jesus' birth seems to have been ideal. Mary was unmarried, she and Joseph were forced by the political demands of a Roman census to be travelling far from home when the baby was due, and accommodation difficulties meant that the baby was born in a stable. It was a dangerous time of political upheaval, with an unstable puppet king, Herod, who was known for his violence. The wise men set off on their journey but, with certain ideas and pre-conceptions about where a king should be found, they inadvertently tipped off Herod that there was a potential rival to his power, leading to the slaughter of the babies and young children of Bethlehem.

It all looked rather unpromising, yet Jesus was born anyway. God's plans will be fulfilled in God's way and at the time of God's choosing, however it may look to us.

The wise men were men of knowledge, yet decided to take a, probably, long and surely dangerous journey to follow the star. Theirs was also a spiritual journey. For all their knowledge, something was missing that could only be satisfied by finding this particular child, paying homage and offering gifts. A thirst that was only satisfied by an encounter with Jesus that set them on a new journey. Being told in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. This 'other road' is not simply the way home, but can also be seen as a metaphor for a new way of living, a new way of following God.

The story of the wise men is a story for us too, a metaphor for our spiritual journeys. An article I read recently, by a lady called Ruth Barton, said:

The story of the magi is a story of pilgrimage. It is about being willing to leave that which is familiar in order to arrive at our deeper spiritual home. It is about seeking something we don't fully understand until we stumble upon it where we least expect it.

Our spiritual journeys also call us, at times, to leave the familiar, to take risks, to seek new experiences of God. God doesn't wait for the circumstances of our lives to be perfect. Like the wise men and others in the nativity stories, we need to be prepared to follow the guidance we are given, whether by a star, an angel, a dream, or an inexplicable longing. We need to be open to the strange, to us, ways in which God chooses to be at work in the world and reveal himself to us.

We also have to accept that God is a mystery, that Christ is a mystery, something that Paul writes about in today's passage from his letter to the Ephesians. God is a mystery that will always be beyond our understanding, yet a

mystery that is revealed to us in Christ. God is a mystery that we encounter in the very depths of our being, even though it is something we can rarely articulate.

And our response to our encounter with God should lead to change in our lives, as it did for the wise men: we are told they were filled with joy, as well as travelling another road. Our encounters, and the way we change in response to them, may be less dramatic than that of the wise men, but it is still a necessary part of the journey, a gradual but continual process.

In the 'Camel's View' reflection that came with my Holy Socks, the camel speaks of his master, becoming more thoughtful, more patient and more gentle, seeing things from the point of view of others. Of still being angry, but at things like cruelty and injustice rather than personal inconvenience. Of inner strength and being content with mystery. We could perhaps sum it up as being more Christ-like.

In this new year, where might our journey with God take us? How might we be changed? What new things are we being nudged towards by God or what old things should we relinquish? We may not know, but one thing we can be certain of: God will be there alongside us, helping us along the way.

The wise men's encounter with the infant Jesus was imperfect, dangerous at times, and yet full of possibility and promise. May we recognise in our encounters with God this year that they are full of that same possibility and promise.