



## Sermon

### ***Epiphany – Christ shown to the Nations***

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

**6<sup>th</sup> January 2019**

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Today is the Feast of Epiphany. “Epiphany” is the English form of a Greek word meaning revealing or showing. Epiphany – the celebration of the revealing of Christ - follows immediately after the Christmas season as we hear again of Christ being revealed to the world. Epiphany celebrates the coming of the Wise Men to see the infant Jesus. They came to see the one born to be king of the Jews. Here the Christ was first shown to the Gentiles.

Our readings start with one of the Old Testament prophecies which at least partially points to this event. Isaiah had written of the light of Israel coming and the glory of Yahweh rising upon them. In the middle of great darkness Yahweh himself would rise upon them and his glory would appear. What could this mean? Well, later Jesus would claim that title of being the Light of the World and who else could be the glory of Yahweh appearing over the people of Israel than the incarnate Son of God?

Isaiah continues by saying, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”<sup>1</sup> Nations refers to *goyim*, gentile nations. Isaiah prophesies that the gentiles will come to the light of Christ and kings to the brightness of his dawn or shining.

You can see how relevant this prophecy is to the coming of the Magi. Their coming to find the Christ-child was the first fulfilment of this prophecy. The spread of the gospel across the world is a greater fulfilment.

Isaiah continues saying that people will come from Sheba carrying gifts of gold and frankincense. Sheba is modern day Yemen – currently racked by civil war. In ancient times, it was famous for possessing great wealth - gold, jewels and spices. Spices don't seem very precious to us, but in ancient times, some spices and aromatic oils were worth more than their weight in diamonds because of their rarity and use as perfumes, incense and medicine.

#### **The Coming of the Magi**

As we turn to the New Testament, we find some time has gone by since the birth of Christ, but he is still very young. Matthew tells us that King Herod carefully enquired when the Magi first saw the star and that he tried to kill the child by having all boys up to two years old killed. From this we can infer that it could have been up to two years after the birth.

Joseph and Mary have settled in Bethlehem and this party of visitors arrive from distant parts. They are Magi – a term for astrologers and wise men who were advisors in pagan courts. The name is particularly connected with Parthians from Babylon and it generally supposed that is where these Magi came from.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 60:3

Their arrival in Jerusalem had caused quite a stir not just with Herod but all of the people of Jerusalem. Mathew does not say how many they were – the number three is probably only connected to the gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is highly unlikely that Court officers would travel to another country alone – they would have had a reasonable size party both to serve them and to guard them on the journey. We can understand then to have a foreign expedition arrive with armed guards would cause a stir of consternation. To have those foreigners ask about the new born King of Jews would certainly set the tongues aflame! And for Herod, it would be very threatening.

### **The Character of Herod**

King Herod the Great was not a Jew but an Edomite. As such he was not well-regarded by the Jewish leaders. His decisions showed only limited concern for Jewish sensitivities. There was continual unrest under his rule making him suspicious of plots to revolt.

To add to the toxic mix, he was paranoid. He killed 7 of his own family because he suspected they were plotting against him.

A prophecy of Balaam is recorded in the book of Numbers. He spoke of the rise of a king in Israel, and even associated him with a star:

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star rises from Jacob; a sceptre comes forth from Israel... Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong.”<sup>2</sup>

This prophecy was much pondered by the Jewish people of Herod’s time. Perhaps a reason for Herod’s concern was that he was an Edomite and this prophecy spoke of Edom falling and a ruler arising in Israel.

So we can understand that the news that wise men had seen some mysterious event in the sky which prefigured a new king would deeply concern him.

### **The Star**

We do not know what the star was. There have been many attempts to match it up with records of astronomical events or calculations of how the planets were aligned in those years. For example, there was a conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. This occurred three times in 7BC. There was a supernova recorded by Chinese and Korean astronomers in 5BC. Some of these sound interesting. However, I wonder whether any normal planetary or stellar event could lead them to the house where the child was. Dr Michael Wilkins, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Biola University raises this question too and suggests that maybe the star was an not astronomical event but angelic. Angels are referred to as stars in ten other places in scripture. The angel of the Lord led the Hebrew people through their wilderness wanderings. It is possible that just as Jesus’ conception was announced by an angel to Mary and to Joseph, and his birth was announced to the shepherds by an angel, this star could have been the manifestation of an angel leading the Magi to the actual house where he was.

It is significant that Matthew tells us twice that they have come to worship the King. They announce it on their arrival in Jerusalem. Then when the Magi arrive they were overjoyed (literally: “they were filled with exceedingly great joy”) and they bowed down and worshiped the child.

This is pretty exceptional behaviour: court diplomats overjoyed at finding a peasant child, falling down before him and worshiping him! They must have received some revelation to provoke such behaviour. In fact when you think about their journey, whether it was from the North-East in Babylon or the South-East in Sheba they would have travelled about 1,700km. Mounting an expedition whether on foot, horse or camel for that distance with a number of attendants required great commitment. It is quite a pilgrimage!

We are privileged with greater revelation than they knew. We know of the mystery Paul refers to in our Epistle reading. We know what Christ came to do, we know of his death and resurrection. We know that Jesus said

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 24:17-18

before his ascension that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

If we know Christ, then we have known the wonder and joy of coming into that repentance and forgiveness of sins. If we know Christ, we know the privilege of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit and being empowered to be co-workers with Christ. So we too should be filled with exceedingly great joy and bow down and worship him who is our God and Saviour.

The point of Epiphany is that Christ is made known not just to the covenant people of God, the Jews, but to all the nations. That was the special focus of Paul's ministry to take the gospel to other nations - to tell them, to tell us that in Christ, we are heirs together with all God's people, Jews and Gentiles – we are members of the one body of Christ and we all share in the promises of Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup> To let the world know that in Christ Jesus and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence – that is good news!

That is still the need in this day. We need to be assured of our position in Christ. Then we need to be telling others. There are so many in our own country who do not know or understand; there are so many in other parts of the world who need to know of Jesus and his great rescue; who need to hear the good news of repentance and forgiveness in His name.

I don't think God expects us all to reach everyone – that is impossible. But he will give us opportunities to connect with some people in the course of our lives. Who might that be for you?

It has been a joy on the last Alpha course to see four people come into relationship with Jesus and several others strengthened and deepened in their faith. This is part of our parish response to the command to make disciples. Some of us are frontline, so help with food, some pray, some help with the costs – it is a team effort. Thank you for your part in that!

As a parish we have been given a particular connection with Kondoa Diocese – it was unexpected but it has been fruitful. We need to be faithful to the calling we have there. Thank you for what you have given and done to support the spread of the gospel in that part of the world. When, as last year, we visit villages where the gospel was first preached in the last year, it is exciting to see that the spread of the gospel is so fresh and so greatly desired. They rejoice because they know what they have been set free from. When spiritual darkness is great, the light of Christ shines and brings truth, forgiveness, freedom, relationship with God, direction and purpose. They rejoice in that light. And so do we!

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:46-47

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 3:7