**The Epiphany of our Lord**

**Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12**

As with gladness men of old, did the guiding star behold, as with joy they hailed its light, leading onward, beaming bright, so, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to Thee.

The words of this particular hymn summarise beautifully the happenings on this day we celebrate as Epiphany. I recall the first time Ian saw the word Epiphany and he read it as Epi-phany. I laughed out loud and said no, no it is pronounced Epiphany. It is an important word that is defined in two ways. Firstly as the ‘manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi in Matthew chapter two. It is also described as ‘a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization’.

A manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The first thing to note about the Magi is they are not from Israel and therefore not among those considered the ‘people of God’. The Magi are gentiles. They come to find Jesus as a newborn King because they have seen his star rise in the East. They come to pay homage and to worship him. Jesus is met by two groups of visitors, the first being shepherds is followed sometime later by these Magi from the East. Paula Gooder in her book Journey to the Manger explores the coming of the Magi. She states ‘the word Magus, when used technically referred to a member of the priestly caste from the Medes and Persians’. This means that these men who travelled to Israel, and met with Herod had come from some distance away. However by the time we come to time of Jesus this word Magi did not only refer to this particular class of priests but also ‘included astrologers and soothsayer, magicians and sorcerers, and finally applied to quacks and con artists’. In Matthew’s gospel, there is no indication that these Magi were anything other than what is portrayed of them. It is possible they are priests but also astrologers, follow a star.

Matthew wrote his gospel for a predominantly Jewish community. He is saying something of note here. These first visitors are outside of the community. They are not Israelites, they do not follow the Law, they quite possibly did not have any religious affiliation at all. But they are a people coming from outside of the tradition in Israel, in Jerusalem. And so God’s kingdom is not limited by the insiders. In fact it is a wonderful way for Jesus kingship to be recognised. As we saw with the shepherds, not the rich, not the priests, scribes or pharisees, but again, here we find outsiders as it were coming to pay homage to Jesus.

At the heart of Jesus coming into the world, there is already a sense that Jesus comes in ‘a moment of sudden and great revelation’. Christ comes not only to those who would consider themselves insiders but Christ comes for all, to everyone. Even in the Gospel reading for Wednesday this week, Simeon declares to Joseph and Mary that Jesus would be ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God’s people Israel’. It is both and. God is revealed in Jesus to be the salvation of all peoples, no matter who they are, where they come from. The Magi come expecting to see the ‘King of the Jews’ despite the fact they at first do not quite know where to look.

These Magi first go see Herod. There is also something quite surprising in the Magi going to Herod. Herod’s title was effectively King of the Jews so for these Magi to approach him about a new King of the Jews would have been quite an afront to Herod. The other surprising thing to know about Herod is his desire for prominence. Herod killed anyone who he thought would get in his way. Herod married Mariamme, who was a descendent of the Maccabees, with the hope that he would be accepted. Despite his love for her, Herod kills Mariamme his wife, as well as her two sons, her brother, her grandfather and her mother because he believed they would usurp his power. We do not know how much the Magi knew about Herod and his tendency to power, but they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod but to go home by another route. Why? Because ‘when King Herod heard’ about the new child born king of the Jews, ‘he was frightened’ (Matt 2:2, 3). Herod did not want any news of another King. He was the King of the Jews and no one would replace him. The news of this small child Jesus was enough to instil fear into Herod, so much so he called for the chief priests and scribes to come and tell him where the child was to be born.

There is something wonderful about the story of the coming of the Magi. There are so many elements to it, so much to draw from but what I would like to draw your attention to is not so much about Herod or where the Magi come from but what it is they do when they finally find Jesus with Mary and Joseph. From verse 9 in chapter 2, when the star finally stopped over the place where the child was, these Magi were overwhelmed with joy! The Magi had travelled a long way following a star they believed would lead them to a baby born to be King of the Jews. And now their journey had met its climax. Here they were, ‘at the house where they found the child Jesus with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage’ (Matt 2:11). Matthew’s language is beautiful, the Magi, overwhelmed with joy come to kneel down before Jesus to pay him homage. They are not there just to say hello. They are kneeling before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. These Magi then open their treasure chests. I hope you can see the beauty and magnificence of this moment. The Magi having traversed from their home to Bethlehem have come to worship Jesus and bring gifts from out of their treasury. Gifts of gold, frankincense and myrhh, all costly gifts. Matthew does not tell us how much gold or frankincense or myrhh, but the impression I get it must have been of some substance because they opened their treasure chests, plural. These were common gifts for Kings.

The Magi are an image of God’s love, joy and abundance. They are also an example to us of how much joy the coming of Christ brought. Overwhelmed with joy! Overwhelmed! Not a hint of joy, but an overflowing exuberant joy! I imagine this is how God feels when one person comes to find the gift of Jesus for themselves. That God rejoices over each one of us, just as the Magi did. And then they knelt down and worshipped Jesus. This for me is a picture of what we do when we come to Church. We come expectant with our hearts filled with the joy of praise, then we turn our hearts to God in worship, bringing the gift of ourselves to God in prayer. And in turn, we receive the gift of the body of Christ in the Eucharist. The Magi in Matthew teach us about joy, about worship and about the giving of ourselves to God. They go the extra mile, they are open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to follow a star to find Jesus, the King of the Jews, then to listen to the dream to go another way home.

In the last verse of As with gladness men of old we read the following:

Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

May each one of us today know something of the joy of knowing Christ, bringing our hearts and minds in worship of Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As we receive the Eucharist today, may we remember the gift of the Magi who recognise Jesus as someone worthy of their homage, praise and gifts. May we too bring the gift of our lives to God today.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.