

Epiphany

St Mary's, 2018

Until the end of the 4th century it was January 6th, Epiphany, rather than December 25th, which along with Easter and Pentecost was celebrated as one of the three major festivals of the Christian church.

Epiphany means revealing or showing forth and is associated with three Gospel stories all of which have this theme, the Baptism of Christ, when he was made known as God's beloved son, the miracle at Cana of Galilee, when according to John's Gospel he first unveiled his glory, and the visit of the Magi which was read today, when he was disclosed to the world as a whole, not just Jews.

Astrology was taken very seriously in the ancient world, and Persians in particular were regarded as experts. A new star was regarded as indicating some momentous event and it is this which the Magi follow to search out and worship the new born child. For Matthew, who tells this story. what matters is that every detail could be seen as fulfilling some verse in scripture and in particular he understands it as foretelling the universal significance of the Christian message. Over the centuries the Church has brought this out in a wonderful poetic way through its art. Christmas cards which show this scene will as often as not have had one king who is old, one middle aged and one young, furthermore one of them will often be black indicating not just the different ages who are called to worship but the different continents of the world. So in keeping with this Matthew ends his Gospel with the risen Christ appearing to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee saying to them "God and teach all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and Lo, I am with you always to the end of time." The journey of the magi from afar indicate this universal significance.

In 1910 in Edinburgh at the height of empire the first big ecumenical conference took place with its slogan “The world for Christ in this generation”. You could hardly have a greater contrast with the culture of our own time which is now in the grip of a secular mentality with the Christian church so often denigrated or marginalised and regarded as on the way out. Below the surface of many individual lives there is still a flame of faith faintly flickering but the zeitgeist as set by the media and commentators now writes Christianity out of the script altogether, regarding it as an obstacle to progress or at best an irrelevance. But this is no time to be losing heart. The light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, words from the John’s gospel which the Archbishop of Canterbury used in his New Year message. And we have a great message to share, the most wonderful story that that world has ever heard or will ever hear. And our present position is hardly new.

Until the conversion of the Constantine in 312, the church was an illegal, spasmodically persecuted sect in a world dominated by the Roman gods. Later It had to make its way into Europe against hostile pagan forces, indeed Scandinavia did not become Christian until as late as the 12th century. Then in the Middle East, once the heartlands of Christianity, the church has had to live under Islamic domination for 13 hundred years and still does in so many countries. The marginalisation of the church we now experience is very familiar to millions of Christians worldwide.

Western secularism, irritating though it is in so many ways because of its superficiality, should be seen like a chill wind, as a bracing challenge. When T.S.Eliot converted to Christianity and was baptised in 1927 he welcomed the new marginal situation in which the church found itself because he said it released Christians from what had burdened them since the 18th century, a badge of respectability for the English middle classes. Indeed he said he found his new situation, out of the intellectual mainstream which had previously occupied, exhilarating. Why might it be so exhilarating? Because it drives us to

go deeper into the faith - and makes us more acutely aware what a supreme gift it is and what a deprivation it is to be without it.

As a result of his conversion Eliot wrote one of his best known and loved poems, “The Journey of the Magi”, with its opening lines “A cold coming we had of it...”. It describes the long, difficult journey they had to reach the Christ child. And it ends

.....this birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these kingdoms,

No longer at ease here, in the old dispensation

With an alien people clutching their gods.

And any Christian who knows and values their faith will feel something of this-no long at ease here, in the old dispensation. But it is important to be clear why we are not at ease here. It is not because of a desire for the old ways, a cultural conservatism, as expressed by the person who said that their lifetime had seen nothing but changes and each one had been a change for the worse. Nor, is it because of opposition to certain social developments. Sadly certain Conservative Evangelicals like to claim a monopoly of the word Christian and associate it with opposition to same sex relationships. There are a range of issues, abortion, medically assisted dying, same sex relationships, nuclear weapons, on which Christians take a range of views, and each issue needs to be considered carefully and prayerfully in its own right. Our Christian faith may lead us to support or oppose a particular policy, but being a Christian should not be identified with any one stance. It is much more fundamental than that. It means that we have a radically different understanding from the secular culture of our time in what it means to be a human being, made in God’s image and called to grow into his likeness. And it means we rejoice

in God's disclosure of himself in Jesus who unites our weak, fallible, sinful lives with his in order that we might fulfil that high calling. This is how we see the world and what we try to live out. We want others to see it too, for we know that in this truth lies their true and everlasting good. It means that in the mainspring of our lives we are bound to be counter-cultural-not feeling superior, for it is by grace alone that we have faith, but in being quite distinctive and radically different in what we think life is all about.

So what hope is there that others in our time might see what we see? The hope lies in the fact that most human beings want their lives to have worth and meaning and the present culture dominated as it is by the "feel good" factor cannot provide this. If you doubt that this is so one has only to look at a few adverts or colour supplements. Studies done on parents bringing up children show that in terms of feelings, the drudgery and hard work outweigh pleasant experiences. But people don't assess the value of parenting on this scale. They want to do it because it can be deeply fulfilling, because it is worthwhile, it has meaning. If the god now being clutched by an alien people is pleasant feelings, feeling good about oneself in body and mind, this cannot last long, simple because the candle that flickers inside us wants something more, wants meaning, and worthwhile purpose to our lives.

What that is cannot be discovered simply by reflecting on the world. Rational reflection can clear away misunderstandings, remove some obstacles to faith and keep our mind open. But the church has always insisted we only know God because he has first chosen to reveal his heart and mind to us, first in the communal life of the people of Israel, and then as it is focussed in the person of Jesus Christ. In him is the Epiphany, the showing forth, the revelation of God and his purpose for us

How good it is to be able to share that gift of faith this morning with one another and Christians throughout the world, in the mystical body of Christ.

How good it would be if our poor benighted society could begin to see this glory.

How good it would be if they could see something of that glory is us who bear the blessed name of Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory, now and for evermore