

Epiphany (5th Jan 2020) Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

St Mary's, Barnes

We are acutely conscious today that we live in a globalised world. What happens in China affects the stock markets in New York. Mining fossil fuels in the West indirectly raises water levels round shallow islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The Christian claim at Epiphany is a startling one. It is that a particular birth at particular place at a particular time has global significance, universal meaning. As today's Gospel began, Jesus was born during the reign of Herod at Bethlehem. But it was a birth which drew three wise men from the East to make a long journey in order to kneel before him as king of kings. In those days most cultures believed that the earth and the heavens were aligned, and astrology was taken for granted. The regular course of the stars governed events on earth, and a new constellation would presage some significant event about to take place. Three Magi, thought of as coming from Persia, saw in one such new star a special sign calling them to follow it. The Greek word Magi is not easy to translate. In Persian from where it derives, it means an influential religious leader and today's versions follow this in calling them wise men. In Greek the word Magi usually referred to magicians. Many translations today use the word astrologer. The three were certainly that, but they were more than that. Anyway, for Matthew, their presence is a sign that God is the God of the whole globe, the heavens and the farthest parts of the earth are his, and he stirs in the hearts of every human being.

Before you put your Christmas cards away, traditionally done after Epiphany, have a look again at any which show the three wise men. Wonderful legends, reflected in manifold magnificent paintings, have sought to bring out their universal significance. First of all, they became transformed from wise men to Kings, a symbol of earthly power kneeling before Divine humility. These kings bring gifts symbolising the wealth of the world being offered in response to Divined love. Then they come to be shown as different ages, one young, one middle aged and one ancient. Later they come to be

depicted as from different continents, with one of them black. This is because of the Christian conviction that this was a particular birth with a global reach. Not just king of the Jews but sovereign of the universe.

There was a time in our history when people had every confidence that these was indeed so. In 1911 a great Church conference took place in Edinburgh with the slogan. “The world for Christ in this generation”. The world was dominated by the British Empire. Islam seemed long defunct, other cultures primitive or backward and bedevilled by superstition. The world now looks very different. Christianity no longer rides high on the wave of European imperialism. Islam is resurgent. Many have discovered spiritual richness in the ancient religions of India. So why do we still dare to make the astounding claim that one particular birth has cosmic significance? What has been termed the scandal of particularity? First it is important to note what the Church does not claim. Jesus is not primarily a teacher of universal spiritual truths such as we get in the Hindu scriptures. He is not primarily a wise moral teacher like Confucius. He is not primarily a prophet of God’s word like Isaiah or Mohammad. He is, as those famous words put it “The word made flesh”. The embodiment of limitless divine self-giving in human terms. So it is that in thinking about the birth of Jesus the first Christians quickly went back in their imagination to before the foundation of the world, to the Divine reality itself. Within the incomprehensible mystery of God, they saw there both infinite self-giving and perfect responsiveness in an eternal cycle of love. Moreover, it was the divine intention from the first that this perfect response to infinite love should be united with humanity. In creating the universe and the whole process of evolution leading up to homo sapiens, God did not abandon it. From the first it was his divine purpose that humanity would be united with divinity in perfect response. In Jesus that eternal response was lived out in a human life of intimacy, trust, love and obedience. So although Jesus was born a particular person at a particular place and time it was always the

divine purpose that all human beings should be united with the God/man Jesus in his perfect response to the self-giving which brings us into existence in the first place. So it is that St Matthew's Gospel ends with the Risen Christ saying to his followers

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

That central verse, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is not just a formula, it is the life in which we live. Christ is in one sense uniquely the Divine Son, from before the foundation of the world. But he came amongst us for one purpose, that we too might share in that relationship-to have the same intimate, trusting, obedient relationship that is eternally his. As the early Christians liked to say, he became what we are in order that we might become what he is. He shared our human life that we might share his divine life. He became human that we might become divine.

The world is now very different from what it was in 1911. But our message is still the same, that birth has cosmic significance and gives meaning to every human life. For those who are in thrall to it, it makes life look totally different. This is the season of the year when T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the magi" is often read. The poem ends with one of the magi reflecting

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Eliot suggests that this is a birth that brings about a fundamental self-reappraisal, a kind of death. It leads to a sense of no longer belonging to the world of celebrities and prices; lifestyles and fashion. We are “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods”

At the same time, we could draw a different conclusion from Eliot’s rather world-weary last line about being glad of another death. In one sense the Christian faith does radically distance us from the world. In another sense it leads us to reaffirm that world as God’s world, as God’s good world. And however, we have mucked it up, creation remains a blessing. Indeed, the more alienated we feel from the world in one respect the more intensely we will want to affirm it in another, as Gods good world, claimed and redeemed by Christ.

So this is a time of joy, of confidence, not the confidence of belonging to the faith of an imperial power with the world in its sway, but the confidence of being a daughter and son of God, called to share in and live out the divine life, charged with a message that is of life changing significance for every human being. And like the Magi we bring our gifts—simply and beautifully put in the old carol by Christina Rossetti,

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

In the western world now, there are few cultural props for the faith, and we live as a minority with our faith often misunderstood or denigrated. This means there is only one way forward, the seriousness with which we put that simple line into practise, the ardour of that heart as expressed in the Christian discipleship of our life. There is

only one way forward. Only one touchstone, the seriousness of our faith.

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