

Christmas II/Epiphany

St Mary's, Barnes

Isaiah 60, 1-6. John 1, 1-18

My favourite nativity scene is the small painting by the 15th century Dutch painter Geertgen in the National Gallery. It shows the Christ child luminous from within, and this lights up the faces not only of those looking down at the crib but the angels flying above.

At this time of the year we remember and celebrate how this light radiates in ever widening circles outwards. It is symbolised in the story of the Three magi who followed a star from the East to kneel before that child, which is the Gospel for the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. Epiphany means manifestation or revealing And this was indeed a fundamental reality for the early church, for when the Gospels were written the Christian faith was being preached all over the Mediterranean world. It is a remarkable story. Despite being illegal, despite fierce though spasmodic persecution, culminating in the great persecution by the Emperor Diocletian in 300, by that time Christians were a significant minority in the West and a majority in some parts of the Greek speaking East. Without the use of force, simply by word of mouth and example, they had won over the heart and mind of much of the Roman world. It was indeed a people's religion, and only later a ruler's one as well.

This week I had an e-mail from someone who has been asked to help draw up a vision for the Church of England in the next decade. He wrote "What are your top three points for a vision for our dear church now?" Good question. I wonder what your answer would be, for this is a question that involves all of us. I am only going to try to explore one point.

It involves first of all being realistic about where we are. The Christian church in China, despite being suppressed by the government is growing phenomenally. The Church in Africa is

growing, as is Islam. But in Western Europe there has been a gradual secularisation of the European mind since the 18th century. There were great revivals both Evangelical and Anglo Catholic in the 19th century but when people moved from the country to the great manufacturing town, the church lost their allegiance and has never regained it. Nevertheless when I was a student in the late 50's the Christian faith was still a significant force in the life of the country. Since the 1960's however there has been a dramatic decline in both attendance and influence and the media which now shapes us is too often one dominated by disdain. The situation is going to become more critical still as a result of Covid, with it being reported in the papers that giving from congregations, which goes to pay the stipends and pensions of the clergy having fallen by £40 million last year.

I say this not to make us depressed but to make my one point. Let us regain a quiet confidence in the Christian story, the greatest story ever told or will be told. We heard it again in today's Gospel.

“In the beginning was the word”. Words are wonderful and mysterious things are they not? Through words I encapsulate what I think and what I want to say. Through words I communicate what I want to say and others receive them into their minds. They go to the very heart of what we are- feeling, thinking beings in relationship with one another.

For the first readers of this today's Gospel “the word” was an extraordinarily rich image. In Greek the word is logos-a fundamental term of Greek philosophy. It referred to the rational principle seen in the ordering of the universe which comes to a focus in every mind in its capacity to think. In all things it flowered in every consciousness. At the same time Christians would have know that behind it was the Hebrew word Dabar, through which God created the heaven and earth. God spoke and said Let things be. It was also the moral imperative that spoke to the prophets, calling them to speak words calling for true justice on earth.

It seemed to them an image through which they could relate their faith to the wider world, and how they could have a glimpse of understanding of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. For my words are at once part of me and yet go out of me with a life of their own. Going out of me, they at the same time remain mine. They both express me and remain me.

Before he became a Christian in 420 the great St Augustine of Hippo in North Africa was a teacher of philosophy and rhetoric. During this time he was a follower of a number of different religions. When he became a Christian he said that the opening words of John's prologue were familiar to him from those religions. What he had never come across before he said was the statement that the word had become flesh, that the divine life behind, beyond and within the universe had taken form in a human life.

The story, however is not just about what happened in the past, however wonderful -it is about us now. As the Gospel put it "as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name"

The whole purpose of the incarnation is that we too might become daughters and sons of God. Christ is eternally and uniquely the Son of God, but we are invited through him to share in that intimate relationship. The early Christians liked to say God became human that we might share his divinity. This divinisation, what the Orthodox churches call theosis, is our high calling and destiny. We are so to grow in the love of God and others that we come to share his very nature. This is the Gospel that has taken hold of us, and which gives us confidence

This is the light shining from the crib, drawing the magi by a star and radiating ever outwards.

The Jews of old had confidence that despite the oppression of the nations around them and their captivity in Babylon, one day the light of God would so shine that the whole world, not just Jews, would be

drawn to its radiance. No wonder the early Christians focussed on Isaiah 60 the first reading we had today

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

² 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.

³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,¹

It is something of that confidence we need in the next decade. The times are indeed unpropitious as T.S.Eliot put it 80 years ago. There is no great philosophy that shapes our society, such as the Greeks had with their idea of reason or logos in all things, no great moral tradition like that of the Hebrews, just a reductive, sceptical relativism. But that is where we are, and that is what we have to relate to, whether we are one or many.

A small church is not a failed church. In Iran there is a tiny church that meets under the severest of constraints. In Pakistan Christians can too easily be accused of blasphemy, which carries a death sentence. In too many countries they are a suppressed minority. They only carry on because they have confidence in that radiating light shining in Christ whose beams fall on the whole world. They do what they can in their situation and that is what we are asked to do in ours. That means being able to talk about our faith quite naturally with our children, grandchildren, neighbours and friends. As I Peter 3,15 puts it

In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

That verse is not asking us to be great philosophers, though some may be. It is asking us to consider what it is about our faith that despite all questions and doubts, still holds us, how it makes a difference in our lives. Whether the times are propitious or unpropitious it is that quiet confidence in the beauty and truth of our faith that matters.