

Epiphany 2020: (Sung Eucharist, Sunday 5th January 2020)

Just before Christmas I attended a pantomime, not far from here, where a friend of mine is the vicar. He played the dame! It was a wonderful evening and had all the traditional elements. One of those was, of course, the moments when those performing on the stage interacted with the audience with phrases such as **“O yes he is!”**, to which we all replied: **“O no he isn’t!”** At one point in the performance this raucous banter was getting louder and louder, when a little child’s voice came from the back of the hall saying **“Well, he might be”**...

I mention this incident as we celebrate the Feast of The Epiphany, because from today’s Gospel passage we hear how the story of the visit of the magi to Bethlehem revolves around the affirmation that Jesus is the king of Israel : **“O yes he is!”** they seem to say and offer exotic, expensive gifts befitting the royal status of Jesus. **“O no he isn’t!”** Herod seems to say, or rather **“Well he might be”** seeing the possibility that Jesus is a serious rival to his authority. And throughout his earthy life, in one form or another, those were reactions to Jesus. From some: **“O Yes he is the Messiah...”** from others **“O no he isn’t”** and from others **“Well he might be”**. Nicodemus seems to have been in that last category as he visited Jesus during the hours of darkness to ask him about himself and his kingdom.

During the Christmas season we celebrate - with particular emphasis and joy - the fact that the baby in the manger is the Son of God, visited by shepherds and by the magi. Later, in Christian tradition the magi became kings, not least because of the prophecy of Isaiah, as we heard in our first reading: **“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn”**. Israel is to become a light to other nations and even foreign kings will serve it. And a central theme of the Epiphany story is the fulfilment of that prophecy: the homage of gentiles to Christ, the Son of God.

And the church throughout the world today witnesses not only to Jesus as the Son of God, God in human flesh, but also to the fact that the cuddly baby Jesus grew up into

a deeply challenging adult who inaugurated a kingdom in sharp contrast to the prevailing secular powers: a kingdom that we are still called to build today. And in some parts of the world, as we know, that witness calls for huge courage and sacrifice, even martyrdom.

So, the Epiphany story reveals the Gospel to be an invitation to all... Jews and Gentiles: an invitation to share in a special relationship with God. As we heard from St Paul this morning: “...*the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*”

And so, the message of the church today is still that God’s grace is for all. But not only that. Isaiah’s prophecy is that one day, all nations will become God’s children, through faith. “*Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you...from far away...*” Peoples reconciled to one another has been God’s purpose from the beginning and wherever the church witnesses to God’s presence in its midst and outside of its boundaries too, reconciliation and renewal become possible.

However, one of the ways which, in my view we can fail to do this, is by failing to present Christianity as something of an adventure. The magi travelled far, they sought out Jesus with real purpose and received divine guidance in the form of a star and then through a dream, in which they were warned to avoid Herod on their return journey. The offering of gifts at the manger is a sign of their submission to Christ.

And the Gospel narrative is packed with stories of people who sought Jesus out with *purpose* and with a sense of adventure, which of course must have included an element of fear but on which they had divine guidance.

Sometimes we might wonder why there are not – for example - more young people in our mainstream churches, whilst they seem to pack into the mega, free churches. Could this be, I wonder, if *there* they have been invited into a daring adventure called discipleship, rather than something a bit more polite. And by adventure, I don’t mean excitement or instant gratification.

When I was a teenager, I didn't have the usual kind of rebellion associated with that age group. Instead of growing my hair long, or smoking at school or whatever, I became a bigoted and thoroughly precious Anglo-Catholic. This shocked my parents, who had been born and born in the church of Ireland. I remember hearing my mother saying to my father: ***"I think that Bruce might become an RC"***.

But my point is that I had been introduced to a new, daring adventure in the catholic wing of the church of England which seemed so much more interesting and so much richer than our rather dull services in our school chapel.

But it's not about how high church or how low church we are. It's about how ***alive*** we are in our faith. You can't market Christianity as a quick fix or a lifestyle choice, because Christian spirituality isn't a comfort zone. It is like falling in love. When we fall in love with someone, we feel more ***alive***. It is what the Dominican Timothy Radcliffe has recently called ***"the adventure of transcendence"***. That was what I was offered as a teenager. No gimmicks, no hard-sell, nothing dumbed down to make faith seem easy. Rather a new world of rich and disciplined liturgy, fine preaching and a call to prayer which inspired me and drew me closer to God.

There are many superficial adventures offered to young people (and others) today and we need to think carefully about how we make Christianity – not so much - more attractive. No. If anything, we need to make it more challenging and related to the major issues of our time. The education department here, does a fine job in that respect and we often see how daring many young people are by nature, in their concern – for example - over climate change.

Of course, there will be times when Christianity will not seem adventurous. Christian life has its boring and pedantic moments and in ministry it can be easy for the "religion machine" so to speak, to overwhelm us.

But the Epiphany narrative opens the Gospel beyond boundaries. It offers a microcosm of a world in which peoples and nations are reconciled to one another and

challenges the church to be in the forefront of that adventure and to invite others to take part in it.