

Epiphany Sermon

Jan 3rd 2021

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany - the word epiphany means manifestation and it has become the time when we remember the visit of the magi, rather mysterious characters who've been variously identified as kings, wise men, Zoroastrian priests, and astrological scholars, who journeyed by stargazing to the baby Jesus.

A few days ago – stargazers were looking for the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn which created a bright light in the sky. It is this conjunction approximately 2000 years ago which has been suggested as the original star of Bethlehem...

In the ancient world it was believed that at the birth of each significant person a new star would appear in the heavens that would shine as brightly as that person's stature deserved – and would remain in the heavens until that person's death.

The Gospel of Matthew does not specify that there were only three blokes on camels as we tend to find in our crib scenes and on our Christmas cards and in our nativity plays — we tend to guess there were three because of the three gifts for the infant Jesus. But any group bringing treasures on long journeys would likely have been accompanied by an entourage of servants, guards, animals, and caretakers. And I am delighted to have read recently – that if these magi were, as is most likely, Zoroastrian priests, that means that some of these wise men would likely have been wise women, as women also served as priests in that tradition.

So the Magi followed the bright new star, and we read at the beginning of this passage, that their aim was to find the king and pay him homage.

When the magi do arrive at the birthplace of Jesus - they are described as being overwhelmed with joy - this is an emotion in total contrast to the response of Herod and all of Jerusalem who were

frightened by the news of this new King's birth. We know of Herod as the villainous power crazed murderer of innocents – and it is interesting that fear drives his motives... and that joy drives the magi's motives.

What emotions does the birth of Christ create in us?

And what does that lead us to in our relationship with Jesus?

The magi pay homage to the baby king Jesus by offering him their remarkable gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – symbolic of Jesus' mission - which they have brought in their treasure chests.

Gifts are a key feature of Christmas – those who were in church on Christmas morning will know of Timothy's tube themed footwear – I hope you have had some gifts to make you feel loved this year...

Epiphany is a wonderful celebration and season – it is the church's celebration of great gifts. But the greatest gift did not come out of the treasure chests that the magi brought to the baby Jesus. The greatest gift was the presence of Jesus in this world. This is just the gift we need— perfectly created for us – perfect love.

The epiphany of God is that God wants to open up God's treasure chest in which are found boundless riches for a fulfilled life – the gift we can all receive is perfect love and forgiveness.

One of the brilliant things I have discovered for this sermon is that the Greek word for treasure chest is thesaurus. Thesaurus literally means a treasure chest of words.

As I think of Herod who acted from fear – I think of so many in our world who are terrified – we have a lot to fear with a pandemic which feels more out of control than ever.

The irony about Herod was that if he had only realised what the prophecies were about and recognised what had brought the visitors from the East, he might have realised that fear was not the correct response. Perfect love had arrived in the world and perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18).

Let us remember the magi who sought out Jesus. May we seek Jesus. Actively.

Let us look for guidance like the star guiding the magi to show us where Jesus wants us to be – where Jesus is.

Whenever we find that place where we bring love – we need to open our treasure chest – like a thesaurus perhaps – so that we can give to others. Our treasure is the good news about Jesus. This is the same good news that spilled out of heaven on the night of Jesus' birth. It couldn't be contained then and we should ensure that it isn't hidden away in our days either. To open our treasure chest – we need to open the story of Jesus – the words of Jesus.

On this feast of the Epiphany – now in 2021 – let us act from faith – finding the beautiful gifts of our faith in our treasure chests to share with others – a world which needs love more than ever.

May we actively seek Jesus, may we be guiding lights to others, may we be generous in the sharing of our gifts – remembering that the greatest gift we have – is the love of Jesus.

Amen