

Feast of the Epiphany, 2016

1. Introduction

Today is a Feastday called the Epiphany, the name means that it is about God becoming known to humanity. Interestingly though, the word does not suggest the Godhead being revealed to us, rather it is about our realisation – our sudden understanding of what something means. We have had all that wonderful celebration about God taking human nature to become the child Jesus, days and days of it since Christmas, but today the Church has a kind of collective moment of understanding: ‘Ah, that’s what it all means!’ we say together. That is why, even though we all enjoy Christmas celebrations and all the things that go with it, it is today that is the theologically important day because we now see behind the tinsel and rhyme, the baubles and the sentimentality – we see through to the realisation of who the baby was, and is, and shall be evermore. So what are the sources of that realisation – where do we get it from? There are four of them and we will spend some time on each for these next Sundays. First come the Magi, then the baptism of the Lord, then the Wedding Feast of Cana and lastly the Presentation of Christ in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. In each of these people come to understand his significance and we are invited to do the same.

2. Those Iranians ...

We begin with the Magi, those wise men from somewhere, rather vaguely described in the Gospel as being somewhere out East. Unfortunately, many of our views about today are too well formed by the music that goes with it. We started our worship with the classic hymn, we sing of kings and a triple gift – and therefore assume that there should have been three of them. Some of the confusion is caused by Ps. 72.10 which includes the words, ‘the Kings of the East shall bring gifts’, words which were taken by Christians as a prophecy of the Magi. The hymn was written by the Revd John Henry Hopkins, Anglican Rector of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and has had a huge influence on how we think about those gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Unfortunately, the connection that Hopkins makes between the gift of myrrh and the suffering of Our Lord at the time of his execution may not be quite the right link to make. It is true that myrrh was used in preparing the dead for burial but its principal use was – and still is – medicinal, you may well have taken it as an ingredient in tablets meant to clear congestion or headaches, it works against hayfever and some cancers. I would like to hang on to that idea of healing because it leads to a slightly different way of reading the gospel passage that you might find helpful. There are similar folk tales of someone being asked to make a choice about their future by choosing between different gifts – is that perhaps what the Magi were doing? Did they offer gold to see if he would be a king? Did they offer incense to see if he would be a priest? Did they offer myrrh to see if he would be a healer? Which would he choose?

3. What does this make clear about the Lord?

So, if today is about us getting the point about Jesus ... then perhaps we ought to be thinking about what the point is: what is this particular passage leading us towards? When the Magi open their treasures they seem to be selecting particular gifts from among their precious possessions; they had thought it out, they had not just popped into Sainsbury’s on the way into the village. Why those gifts? It interests me that the three gifts were offered but does not say whether he choose between them, which makes this story unlike the folk tales I mentioned earlier. We are going to have to work out the answer to this ourselves! One way to read the gospel would then be to ask ourselves that same set of questions. What do we say he was – a king? A priest? A Healer? If we think back over his life and ministry we can the Lord behaving in *all* three of those different roles at different times. We believe that he was the Son of David, he descended from that ancient Hebrew king through both his parents so, yes, he was of kingly stock. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that he is our great high priest who stands ever before the throne of the Father offering intercession for us. The gospels are full of stories of his healing power and there is many modern Christian who can bear witness to his healing grace. So, we can say that Our Lord and Saviour fulfilled all those roles and more besides. Perhaps, it is that at different times in our lives that we need him to be different things to us. At first, of course, we have to accept his lordship over our lives, to give ourselves over to the

service of God and our neighbours ... but there will also be times when we need him as our priest to make intercession for us and other times again when it will be his healing that meets us in our place of need.

4. 'What shall I bring him, poor as I am'

We might want to go on to ask ourselves whether we should in some way be bringing a gift to the Lord this morning. This is a slightly tricky area, of course, because we have to remember that our salvation is a free gift of God, not something that we have to earn or buy our way into – but our natural reaction will be to want to make some kind of thank-offering. What would be the thing you would bring? What would be your personal gold or myrrh? As the old Christmas song puts it, 'What shall I bring him, poor as I am; if I were a shepherd I would give a lamb ... I shall give him my heart'. We are challenged to give our lives in gratitude to the service of God and humanity. When I was in ministerial training my mentor group were told that we had to make a video: what we wanted to say that we should respond lovingly to the God who has saved us and who wants to share his love with all humanity, so that we might in turn become loving. We got one of our spouses to film us laying things on a church altar that represented the lives that we wanted to offer, Steve (who was a GP) put his stethoscope on the altar, I was writing a lot in those days so put my laptop ... and others gave other items. The experience was oddly moving, although the video itself was a little bit *naff*. Perhaps it was all too personal, I don't know but that but that question is one we should each be asking continually – how, today, will I respond in love to the God who saves in Jesus Christ?

5. Conclusion

That felt like a conclusion but perhaps there is one more thing to be said. The way that we come to Epiphany, with the music and the gifts and all, carries the danger that we will make it into something soft and fluffy whereas in fact there is something searingly important to be said here. We do have a choice about our lives and we must not evade that choice – we now know how Jesus of Nazareth chose to live his life: what will be our choice?

To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb,
be all glory, majesty, dominion and power;
Now and forever, Amen.