

## **Epiphany 2021**

**Isaiah.60:1-6, Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6, Matthew 2:1-12**

### **Looking up and Looking in**

Most New Year messages were fairly scathing of 2020 and it's easy to understand why. It has left many in fear of livelihoods, many remembering lives lost that should not have been lost (and often not directly due to covid) and many of us exhausted just trying to keep our different worlds functioning as best we can.

We all knew where Bethlehem was at the break of the year, few of us knew of Wuhan from whence came, not light but an insidious darkness that has pervaded our lives.

However, good things have happened even in the midst of that dark export from an unknown Chinese town. Isaiah knew well the spirit of love and kindness often shines brighter against a darker sky.

Today we celebrate Epiphany – the visit of the magi to the Christ Child presenting their three gifts. They followed a bright star to see the light of the world. It is a strange and enigmatic story. In nativity plays it's conflated with the stable, the visit of the shepherds and animals and yet it takes place a little later, Mary and Joseph having found room in a house. Our plays often dress the three kings in ancient garb and yet this story conveys a very modern message. We do not know if there were three wise men, there is no evidence that they were kings and cannot be sure they were even men. They were wise, they were foreigners, they were not Jews, and they did present three types of gift. Gold for the material world, incense for the spiritual world and myrrh for the means by which the two are joined – the sacrifice of Christ.

In Christian art as many of you know, the magi are usually portrayed as men, as three, and of course as representing the races of the world with the look of an African, Asian and a European or Caucasian. This isn't pure history; it's interpretation as all history is. Our faith is rooted in the light of Christ's humanity not in colour culture or class.

On Christmas Eve I managed to see the "star of Bethlehem" the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter over Canvey Island as I said to some of you the other day. Something so distant shining over something so familiar and near. It was a humorous and thoughtful juxtaposition to ponder, which I continue to do.

The pandemic has affected every part of the world. It has challenged values – what value we place on an elderly life at greatest risk, what value we place on a lowly paid key worker, what value we place on ordinary freedoms and so on.

Freedom is the great biblical theme, we are created in the image of God to reflect God and to use our freedom to do so. We more often cover it with the darkness of sin and

become enslaved by sin and in sin – this is the cry of the prophets and the mission of Christ is to free us once and for all from such slavery to become co-heirs, to be set free and to discover that in service of God is found perfect freedom – of self is slavery. We see pandemic behaviours that serve the self and devalue others and also happily the opposite. In Christ the “self” dies, so that God and true freedom may be born. God values us more than we do ourselves. No-one has expressed this type of death more eloquently than TS Eliot in his Poem – journey of the magi – it concludes thus:

*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.*

Amongst other great themes of this year has been the Black lives matter movement. Behind which is righteous anger and a worthy call for greater diversity and truer respect in all parts of our society and the way our affairs are conducted. Against this the Epiphany and the story of the magi visiting Jesus should be seen in its fullest contemporary challenge. It is a challenge to all – even the righteous.

Every age and every received and accepted wisdom shall be brought low before the wisdom of God – the word made flesh – full of grace and truth. We of course create histories and wisdom that do not set us free but enslave us – the truth of God in Christ rarely leaves us “at ease in the old dispensation” as Eliot puts it. The life of the Christian though is not a one off visitation that shakes everything up and puts it into perfect order never to be revised.

Apparently 1 in 200 people in the world can trace their ancestry directly to Ghengis Khan – that is a much greater strike rate than the worst affected covid areas. He may have gone in for mass impregnation rather than mass vaccination as a means of bringing order to the world – as well as exterminating countless millions of Persians and others that got in his way. But he is still a hero to millions – they see a different history and no doubt his statues will remain. I was deeply taken with the exquisite nature of the Mediaeval Mali imperial art in the British Museum’s exhibition many years ago – it even challenged the beauty of ancient Egypt, but I knew nothing of its power and wealth being built on slavery and blood lust for fellow Africans and Arabs. I marvelled at the Inca remains and lamented the passing of their culture only to have it tempered by knowledge of their mass use of human sacrifice to quell lesser tribes and peoples. I have happily enjoyed my Chinese lunch in a Sichuan restaurant without

knowing of their suffering the massacre of a third of their population in ten days to make them properly Chinese in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century – some things don't change. I have delighted in the splendours of Ottoman art and even stayed in the odd palace only to be made queasy by the stories of the orphaning and forcible conversions of mostly Christian boys as Janissaries to do their murderous conquests for them. The list is endless before we even start on the European empires or the modern enslaving Chinese empire of today.

We too often embrace false order and neat maxims like “country good empire bad” – to paraphrase the “four legs good two legs bad” of Eliot's great contemporary George Orwell. There are no clean hands in history. Perhaps we should refrain judging in the light of our own standards age and views for we will be judged in like manner too.

Rather we are called to judge in the light of God's Son – full of grace and truth. Born in in the midst of the Roman Empire and a dark time in Jewish History – Christ is the light that draws us on and beyond ourselves, beyond our land culture and identity. Even more challenging He shines deep into our inner selves, to see by whom we are made and for whom. Humanity is set free and fully defined only by one who though divine is born as we are.

Isaiah draws his prophecy to a close by saying that

*“your light has come, the glory of the Lord is rising on you, though night still covers the earth and darkness the peoples. Above you the Lord now rises and above you his glory appears. The nations come to your light and kings to your dawning brightness. Lift up your eyes and look round”*

The Magi do just that they lift up their eyes, but then they bow their knee and look in very deeply. The last line of the gospel is not just a throw-away line indicating a choice of route and avoidance of Herod, it is a profound spiritual challenge for all people, all nations at all times.

*“They returned to their own country by a different way.”*

1 in 200 may have been sired by the murderous Ghengis Khan but all have been made in the image of God who is to be fully known in the sacrificial love of Christ. Epiphany is a way of looking up and looking in at the light of Christ, of looking beyond ourselves and into ourselves. It is a way of death and rebirth that always leads to a different way.