

Sermon – Epiphany January 2023

Isaiah 60 v 1-9, Matthew 2 v 1-12

Play an Epiphany Carol - The Three Kings, by Peter Cornelius - before I speak... to contemplate the story of the three kings/magi on which I'm going to talk.

Well, here we are on Epiphany Sunday 2023, the day we traditionally mark the coming of the three kings, wise men, magi or whatever we want to call them. Just like in the carol we heard. An end point of our Christmas celebrations. But is it really an end point or something of a beginning?

For Dougie with his baptism this morning it is of course the official start of his life within the family of the church. But for us all too, Epiphany can mark the start of a new chapter for ourselves both as individuals but also corporately as St Paul's. 150th over; what comes now?

Now many of you know that when I'm doing the talk at the service, I like to use a bit of a prop to make the point and this morning is no exception. I wanted to bring along something very special for me back in the life of the Charlesworth family in Derbyshire. What could this be, you may wonder. Dare I say it harks back to about 1960 when my not-so-rich parents bought the family one big Christmas present to share between us. The present was a Dansette record player, some of you may remember it, that piece of advanced technology that played records at 45 or 33 rpm and performed the miracle of automatically changing records by dropping them from a stack onto a turntable. Gone were the days of my dad's old 78s. For those of you of more modern vintage, this was a seismic change in recorded music equivalent to when CDs and DVDs and walkmen were replaced by streaming music and video for Spotify or Netflix to your phone or Ipad.

Now the Dansette is long since gone, but at the time my sisters and I were each given a record to play. I think my elder sister's record was something like Helen Shapiro. So I'd wanted to bring my first ever record which was an EP of Christmas carols (my dad always wanted me to be a chorister). Can I find that 60 year old record of the Epiphany carol you've just heard? I know I kept it somewhere but..... Play or inflict carol not for personal nostalgia of something very special in my memories but because I realise it really sums up what Epiphany is all about. Instead go record, 78, CD.

Why does the carol sum up Epiphany?

When God comes to man and man goes to God, there are consequences. Epiphany marks such a meeting place.

The carol you just heard, The Three Kings by Peter Cornelius, is an interesting setting because in fact there are two carols in one in the piece of music. You may remember

the choir singing gently in the background. That was an ancient carol or Lutheran Hymn by Philipp Nicolai dating back to 1597. It gives a background of Jesus, the source of all goodness and truth being ever with us and how his word and love feeds and leads us. How he is both God and Man prophetically descended from the very beginnings of the nation of Israel and its great King David so prominent in the old Testament of the Bible. Listen to this as summation of theology. It could take weeks of sermons to unpack.

*How brightly shines the morning star, with grace and truth from heaven afar.
Our Jesse tree now bloweth.*

*Of Jacob's stem and David's line, for thee, my bridegroom King, divide, my soul
with love o'erfloweth.*

*Thy word, Jesu, inly feeds us, rightly leads us, life bestowing. Praise oh praise
such love o'erflowing.*

And then above that quiet steady backdrop of Christ's divine presence for us, we have the soloist singing Cornelius's carol, telling the story of the Three Kings, their quest to find the birth of Jesus, their bringing and presentation of gifts for a King: Gold, Incense and Myrrh. But it's the last verse of that carol I want us to concentrate on.

*Thou child of man, lo to Bethlehem, the kings are travelling travel with them.
The star of mercy, the star of grace, shall lead thy heart to its resting place, gold,
incense, myrrh thou canst not bring; offer thy heart to the infant king, offer thy
heart.*

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In the carol we are being implored to travel with the kings, or like the kings, to meet God in the form of Jesus Christ – even if we have no material gifts like Gold, Incense and myrrh to offer. A couple of important points here. The kings did not just **stare at the stars** and say joyfully a new King has been born. Just like the poverty-stricken shepherds, they got off their proverbial backsides and went to find and meet him. They went to meet. Secondly, we don't have to have great gifts of wealth, standing, perfection or intelligence to meet God; we just go and meet as we are, faults and all.

But this raises a couple of bigger questions.

In a society where less than half our population would describe themselves as being even nominally Christian – why would we want to go and meet Jesus when apparently he's been dead for 2000 years? And secondly, what on earth do we mean about 'offering our heart'?

The answer to the first question of why we would go to meet with a God many would argue doesn't exist or see as relevant to our lives can partially be discovered in our

first reading from Isaiah. Put simply and perhaps selfishly, there is a lot in it for us if we do. That applies to a Christian of 90 years, to Dougie at the start of his faith or to any of us who have never thought much about it or thought it is not for me.

The Isaiah reading is a message to the people of Israel the best part of 3000 years ago and 900 years before the birth of Christ. It's to a people who were going through sheer hell. They had been invaded and conquered, dispersed, persecuted, discriminated against and exploited. Just as we can view our future with great fear and apprehension, so did they.

Against this background, Isaiah comes along with a mood-changing message. God has come not only to meet and rescue you but to make provision for a wonderful life ahead.

Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

See darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

Nations will come to you light and Kings to the Brightness of our dawn.

In the passage immediately before, Isaiah has been describing all that is wrong with Israel, their departure from a relationship with God, their evil doings and the need for confession and reformation. Any similarities to now. Despite or because of all this, God comes to meet and say Arise Shine for your light has come.

Now the Old Testament of the Bible describes the long relationship of God with his chosen people of Israel, their ebbing and flowing in faith, trust and their disobedience. The end result was always to be. That perhaps in desperation, but always in love that God would come in person as Jesus Christ to live with us and show and share with all humankind how we should live together and with him. In the New Testament, the special relationship between God and the people of Israel is extended to all those who believe in him, no matter where we are from, what we have done or what we possess.

What's for us in meeting with Jesus, a relationship with the divine? Well, a wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, a Prince of Peace giving us the blueprint for our relationships and the world about us, of what is right and true and contentment for self and love for neighbour. The positives are almost beyond description and socially quite revolutionary and reforming. His glory rises upon us. This is the Good News of Jesus. We will be different.

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But we still have to answer that second question, What do we mean by offering our heart when we go to meet God?

In offering our heart we are committing to build God's Kingdom with him and that means following his guidance, accepting and seeking his forgiveness when we get it wrong – but also being a pithy, loving, positive presence in our society, to our neighbour, that is noticeable in its difference and at times controversial and certainly not always easy. We are called to witness and proclaim Christ's Kingdom. These are both an expression of love not of condemnation. Sometimes a difficult path to tread. What does it mean?

Think of the early church when they sold their possessions and shared the proceeds around them to all who had need, think of the medieval monks who were the first line of sacrificial care for sickness when plagues and other disease like leprosy were rampant, think of Wilberforce and the campaign against the vested interests of slavery, of Shaftsbury confronting the evils of social poverty, of Martin Luther King tackling the scourge of racial segregation in the Southern States, of Bishop Desmond Tutu and the ending of South African apartheid, of the role of churches in building a network of foodbanks in our current crisis.

As Jesus said,

'You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again. It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.'

Do we taste of salt to the world around us? Is the Church, as the body of Christ here and nationally, seen as relevant and distinctive by the world about us in these times of crisis? As Clive said last week, surely there has never been a greater need for Christ's presence and message of hope for the world about us. The answers to these questions are not to be found staring at the stars or listening to old records, but in getting up, travelling with the kings and offering our heart.

In the past, I thought of Epiphany being a nice story about the three kings bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh plus of course the original Mr Nasty, Herod the King.

In conclusion, can we see, in the context of the Isaiah reading and the Carol we played at the beginning.....can we see Epiphany as being the meeting point between God as Jesus and humankind? But it's not a spectator sport. God came to meet us as Jesus; we are called to go and meet him, perhaps for the first time, to offer our hearts ... to commit our reformed lives to his service of love to the world our neighbour. Epiphany is the beginning of a chapter not an end.

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Amen