

January 6th, 2019: Matthew 2:1-12, K. Freeman

Happy New Year to you all. I hope you had a joyful Christmas – however you spent it, it's not uncommon after Christmas to feel a bit low. January is the month when reality sets in, and we come back down to earth after the build-up and excitement of Christmas. For many, Christmas is a time of excess – excess food, drinking, spending and partying, It's a time when our everyday routines are suspended and we indulge a little – or maybe a lot. It's often also a time of idealism, when for a moment the world seems full of peace and joy as we gather with those we love. And Christmas is a time of great promise and hope, when we remember the amazing event of the incarnation, when God became a human being and came to live among us. As we gather around the baby in the manger, we're filled with wonder, just like the shepherds, wondering what impact this little child would make. Here at Grace I really enjoyed the weeks of Advent and my first celebration of Christmas with you. Thank you for welcoming my family and for the cards and gifts you gave me.

Now here we are, it's 2019. With New Year's resolutions in the aftermath of indulgence, January is the month when gyms and weight-loss groups see huge increases in memberships. January is also the month when many people are confronted by debt, brought on by overspending in December. So in January, we come back down to earth. The decorations come down. We go back to work. Our kids and grandkids go back to college. And alongside the dieters and those in debt, we're confronted with the effect of what happened at Christmas.

Today and over the next several weeks we celebrate the season of Epiphany. As Christmas is about the hope and promise that Jesus Christ brings, Epiphany is when we begin to see this hope and promise being fulfilled.

The word Epiphany means ‘appearance’ or ‘manifestation’. In our scriptures it means the appearance of Israel’s Messiah, not only to Israel but to all nations and all peoples. It’s when the true reality of the incarnation is revealed to us. It’s about the signs and wonders which, if we’re paying attention, allow us to recognise who Jesus is – signs and wonders which should lead us to respond in some way to God’s amazing grace.

Today in our gospel reading, we remember the Magi, the wise men from the East, who sought *and recognised* the truth about Jesus Christ. Matthew’s gospel is the only gospel to refer to wise men or Magi - ‘three kings’ aren’t mentioned at all. The identification of the Magi as ‘kings’ is based on the Old Testament reading we heard from Isaiah 60, in which the prophet states that the Messiah will be worshipped by kings. But the Magi were more akin to *astrologers*, probably from Persia, and possibly priests of the Zoroastrian religion, who were known to have paid a lot of attention to the stars; it’s nothing remotely like the daily horoscopes we find in newspapers, though – this star-gazing was highly regarded as a **science**.

Of course, without any light pollution, the night sky that the Magi observed must have been amazing. When they discovered an especially bright star, they were convinced this was the sign that the King of the Jews had been born. What an adventure for the Magi, setting off into the unknown, prompted inwardly by their cognition and outwardly by the leading of a star – it was a giant leap of faith. They knew that the infant king was immensely important, so they brought gifts that reflected that insight. One wonders what Mary and Joseph thought of these foreign sages and their extravagant gifts! No stuffed animals or rattles, baby clothes or diapers presented to baby Jesus here – but symbolic gifts - gold fit for a king; the resin of frankincense for a high priest; and myrrh traditionally used in oil for anointing.

Matthew doesn't say what happened to the Magi once they returned to their country. But we know that they found what they were searching for when the star stopped over the place where Jesus was, and they bowed down in worship, an appropriate response. And we know these men were **foreigners**, which leads us to this meaning: that God intends his light to draw people from far and wide, revealing his glory, his grace and his presence *to all nations* through his Son, Jesus Christ. Matthew, who was a Jew, wants to convey how the Messiah, who was rejected by Jewish leaders from the time of his birth, reaches out to all people who would accept Him as their king. The prophet Isaiah said "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." The reign of Christ is without limit: Jew, Gentile, wealthy, poor, oppressed and oppressor - Jesus, the Light of the World, came for all people. And this was revolutionary.

Herod, the puppet king of the Jews put in place by the Romans, was greatly disturbed when these foreign astrologers told him of the birth of a new "king of the Jews". This new king would pose a threat to him, to his sense of entitlement to the rule of Judea and his comfortable life of luxury. Herod's fearful response was to condemn to death all male children under the age of two in the vicinity of Bethlehem – the Massacre of the Innocents, described in Matthew 2:16. But Jesus escapes this fate because of warnings given in dreams to his parents and to the wise men. The holy family flee as refugees to Egypt. The wise men disobey Herod's vindictive order to return to him when they found the child – instead, they return to their country by another route. And that's the last we hear about them.

I wonder what difference their Epiphany made to the Magi? When they returned home, do you think they went back to their same old routine, as we do? No doubt they still had day-to-day responsibilities – but they must have been deeply changed by their encounter with Jesus.

Just as it's tempting to think 'another Christmas is over and nothing has changed', can it be true *for us* that as another Epiphany comes and goes, it has changed nothing? I hope not –

true encounters with Jesus **will** disrupt and change lives. And for Christmas and Epiphany to have any personal meaning at all, we must *welcome* this change - we need to look for signs of light and life and respond to the grace we've found in Jesus Christ.

In what ways might you discover what God is doing in your life and the lives of the people in your communities and in our world? The Bible is clear that we must seek in unexpected places: among the poor and lowly; in the stranger; among the outcast and in the suffering. No wonder it's so difficult for God to get our fixed and lasting attention – do we really want to look there? It takes a great leap of faith to go where the true light is leading us.

As Jesus later faces his terrible suffering, Pilate's Gentile soldiers are the first *since the Magi* to call Jesus the 'King of the Jews'. The crown they give him is a crown of thorns, and his throne for that moment is the cross; and instead of a bright star, *darkness* came over all the land. And then the voice of another foreigner is heard - the Roman Centurion - as he experiences his own 'epiphany' and cries out: 'Surely he was the Son of God'.

May we all be granted the grace to recognise and pursue the light of our own epiphanies throughout our walk (and perhaps even leap) of faith. Amen.