

## Sermon – Epiphany 2018 Haselton

There was a wonderful moment in the Northleach crib service this year when Finn Mooney, the young lad playing Joseph, on learning that Mary was to have a baby, exclaimed: *I never expected that!*

That sense of surprise, so shocking that it could almost be called terrifying, is not an emotion restricted to that first Christmas, but continues throughout the season of Epiphany, that we entered yesterday and continues all the way through January to the end of Epiphany on 2<sup>nd</sup> February.

Epiphany, like Christmas, is also a season when expectations are turned upside down, a season when expectations are transformed.

This morning I'm going to preview the whole season of Epiphany for you, briefly drawing out the key themes of each of the main Epiphany stories, to illustrate how that first moment of Epiphany, when the wise men recognised Christ in the manger, is repeated time and again, not only in scripture but in our own lives too.

As we journey through Epiphany that lasts the entire month of January the church celebrates five major stories incidents in the life of Jesus and the early church. Each one is about unexpected transformations. But other important themes dominate Epiphany too especially journeys, hospitality and humility. Epiphany is a great season of surprises in which we recall a succession of transformational experiences that come to speak of the transforming love of God that is also available to each one of us today as well.

The season begins, of course, with the wise men finally arriving at their destination, Bethlehem, only to discover, not a King in a palace but a Messiah in a stable. Despite their rapidly adjusted expectations, they share their symbolic gifts that remind us of kingship, divinity and sacrifice.

Libby Lane, the Bishop of Stockport, draws a parallel between the wise men journeying towards Jesus and our own spiritual journey:

*“Our own journey towards the Christ-event, towards our own meeting with Jesus, can often feel filled with doubt and discomfit, an unsettling of our deepest self. We feel drawn, but we do not know where we are going. It feels foolish – leaving our familiar surroundings, our home comforts, to struggle with harsh conditions which may threaten our personal safety. And for what? An uncertain outcome at best. It is just not rational. It does not feel very wise.*

It is both encouraging and unnerving that our own spiritual journey might mirror something of the wise men's journey to the crib. Encouraging, because there is strength to be derived from knowing that someone else has travelled our road before us; unnerving because we too might find our expectations challenged. As with the wise men, God welcomes us to the crib, just as we are, with whatever gifts we have brought, however appropriate or inappropriate they might seem. The wise men had to shrink their egos to fit into the stable and receive hospitality from the God in the trough. How far have we yet to travel until our perceptions of self can fit in alongside the cattle and lambs?

24 hours may be a long time in politics but it is a far longer time in the life of the church. Churches that celebrated the

Epiphany yesterday will today be celebrating the festival of the Baptism of Christ and traverse several decades in a matter of hours. Jesus' own baptism was a moment of transformation for him, but also for his baptiser, John, whose initial reluctance to baptise Jesus is clearly recorded in the gospels. Jesus' humility in accepting the hospitality of baptism at the beginning of his ministry has echoes of Jesus offering hospitality to his disciples in the washing of their feet towards the end of that same earthly ministry. By aligning his life with ours, Jesus accepts the hospitality offered by humanity and so his journey, becomes ours also.

There are three other significant stories in the Epiphany season, only one of which is routinely celebrated on a Sunday.

Jumping around the history of the church with scant attention to timelines, we find ourselves on the 3d Sunday of Epiphany reflecting on Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Jesus travels to a wedding, enjoys the hospitality of his hosts, and is then called upon to engineer a material transformation that literally saves the day. It is a story that demonstrates the rich abundance of God's love of us, the overwhelming, overflowing, abundance that lies at the heart of creation; all in direct contrast to the theology of scarcity that dominates all major economic systems both then and now.

And then on the 25<sup>th</sup> January the church recalls the conversion of St Paul. You will recall how Saul is on his famous physical journey towards Damascus when it is dramatically transformed into a spiritual one as he is blinded by a vision of Christ in which he is challenged to repent. From a lead persecutor of the church, Saul is transformed into Paul, one of the leading, possibly the leading, architect

of our faith. This doesn't happen instantly; rather Paul is forced to endure several days of blindness until released by Ananias; and during this time, he is entirely dependent upon the hospitality of strangers. A truly terrifying Epiphany experience.

And then our final Epiphany story – that we celebrate on 2 February - takes us right back almost to the birth of Jesus as we join Mary and Joseph journeying to the temple with Jesus for him to be received hospitably by the temple in the ritual act of presentation, known to us as Candlemas. At the temple they are met by faithful Simeon and Anna who rejoice that God's promise to them has been fulfilled; that is, that they would greet the Messiah before their life's end.

Yet in the midst of all the celebrations we hear those pained words of Simeon that undoubtedly stain Mary's heart as he declares how Jesus' ministry that will lead to such riches, will pierce her own heart too. How, in that moment, she must have regretted setting out for the temple that day.

Five Epiphany stories, each of which involves a journey and hospitality, all of which together take us on a journey from the crib, through the early days of Jesus' ministry into the life of the early church and then back again almost to where we began on Christmas morning.

And at the heart of each of these five stories lies a crucial moment of recognition as the the wise men, John the Baptist, Paul, Jesus' fellow wedding guests, Simeon and Anna acknowledge Jesus as The Christ. For each one of them, a truly surprising, shocking, even terrifying moment of Epiphany.

But the season of Epiphany doesn't end there but continues to the cross and beyond into our own lives and experiences every time we choose to recognise the presence of Christ with the humility of the Magi.

And therein lies the key for our discipleship. For every time we recognise the presence of Jesus – whether that be in an act of hospitality, an unexpected act of generosity, or a selfless act of sacrifice – every such instance is a moment of potential transformation; a moment when we are opened to the shaping of the Spirit; a moment when we may welcome the Spirit moulding us ever more closely into the likeness of Christ.

Epiphany is a wonderful season in which to continue to celebrate the incarnation. But it is also the season in which we – at the beginning of a new calendar year – can grasp the opportunity to step forward a little more courageously in our own journey of faith.

May that be my prayer for you, and your prayer for one another, this Epiphany; courageously embrace humility in the name of Jesus, Amen.