

## **Epiphany**

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 7 January 2018 by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker

*Readings: Isaiah 60 verses 1-6 and Matthew 2 verses 1-12*

You may remember playing the parlour game 'Consequences'. The idea is to construct a story, which is usually absurd because the participants in the game don't know what the previous participant has written on the folded piece of paper which is passed around. This is light hearted fun. But in real life, consequences can be much more serious. Actions, as they say, have consequences.

For my first two years in Guernsey, Radio Guernsey invited me to contribute the daily 'Guideline' in the week leading up to Christmas. This year, instead, I had the interesting opportunity to reflect on the special celebrations in Christmas week that are usually overshadowed by Christmas. For example, Boxing Day in the Church's calendar is the feast of St Stephen, remembering the first Christian martyr, stoned to death because of his preaching about the significance of Jesus. Three days after Christmas, we leap on to the other side of the feast of the Epiphany which we are celebrating today to remember the slaughter of the innocent – the young children of the Bethlehem area killed on the orders of King Herod because of his fear of the consequences of the birth of the King whom the wise men, innocently but naively, announce to Herod.

If Christmas is the revelation of God breaking into the world in a new and remarkable way through the birth of his Son, Jesus, Epiphany is the revelation of the consequences of Jesus' arrival – how he makes an impact.

Epiphany means 'manifestation'. It's the revelation to the world of Jesus' divine identity and significance. It starts in Jesus' infancy with the arrival of the wise men, who represent all from any place or culture who come to worship and pay homage to Jesus.

Matthew packs a lot into his story of the coming of the wise men, and Christian tradition has elaborated the story even further. Since the wise men brought three named gifts for Jesus, they were quickly assumed to be three in number, and were supplied with names: Casper, Melchior and Balthasar. They were understood to represent the three known continents of Africa, Asia and Europe, which explains why painters often represent one of them, Balthasar, as black.

Matthew calls them 'wise men'. That means he thought them to be learned astrologers found in ancient Persia. Tradition soon upgraded them, and they became oriental kings. This was a splendid gift to later artists, who supplied them with crowns and depicted them as wearing gorgeous and exotic clothing and riding camels. And an even greater gift to those preparing nativity plays!

The rich gifts that the wise men took from their treasure chests and presented to Jesus pointed to his unique destiny as 'Emmanuel' or 'God with us'. The value of the gifts underlined the worship that the wise men offered as they knelt before Jesus, to the amazement of Mary and Joseph.

From the earliest times, Christians have attributed particular significance to each of the gifts. The gold was seen as a representation of Jesus' kingship. The frankincense indicated his divinity, his unique sharing in God's nature, and the myrrh symbolised the humanity that the Son of God embraced when he was born of a human mother. Since myrrh was used in the Middle East to embalm corpses, it took on a further significance

as referring to Jesus' eventual suffering, death and burial. In the carol, *We three kings of Orient are*, a whole verse is dedicated to that interpretation of the gift of myrrh:

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume  
breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
sealed in a stone-cold tomb.

St Bernard of Clairvaux, who lived in the twelfth century, was blessed with great spirituality. But he took a strictly practical view of the gifts. The gold was to support the Holy Family on their journey to Egypt to escape Herod's persecutions. The incense was to freshen the atmosphere in the stinking stable, and the myrrh was to deliver the newborn Christ child from any worms that infested his intestines.

Well, this is all great fun. But while the gorgeous overlay may be innocent and sometimes helpful, for example, by keeping the arrival of the wise men in our minds, there is a danger that we miss Matthew's central message, which is already rich in detail.

Matthew draws a number of contrasts. The wise men come from a great distance and do not know the Holy Scriptures that might otherwise have directed them directly to Bethlehem. And so they call on Herod, and cause consternation in the royal court and the wider city. But interestingly, the wise men are allowed to travel alone to Bethlehem. Why did nobody accompany them? Surely a missed opportunity! Those who possess the Holy Scriptures and live near the birthplace of Jesus fail to take advantage of their blessings. Those who live far away make the most of the few chances they have been given, and succeed in discovering the Saviour of the world. Does this ring bells with us?

Matthew is writing his gospel for a community that is deeply steeped in Jewish tradition. And so the ignoring of Jesus' birth by the Jewish establishment pained him, as did Herod's slaughter of the innocent children in his attempt to destroy any possible opposition to his rule. Later on, at Jesus' crucifixion, it is another Gentile, the Roman centurion, who perceives Jesus' true identity; 'Truly, this man was the Son of God.' Matthew's gospel ends with the command to 'make disciples of all nations'. The success of this mission to the Gentiles contrasts with the failure of Jesus' own people to accept and believe in him.

Matthew also contrasts the unpleasant Herod and his court with the Holy Family and those who stand with them, such as the wise men. They may seem to be vulnerable and defenceless, but God transforms the situation and rescues them in good time. God's gracious goodness proves more powerful than any human weakness.

The wise men, and the season of Epiphany that they introduce, are supreme importance in helping us to focus on the identity and significance of the child born at Bethlehem, to focus on the consequences of Christmas. The world gets excited for a short time, but sadly gets distracted and moves on to other business rather than taking time to get to know the child and discovering in him the most wonderful and perfect revelation of God. It is the gift of faith, open to all who take the time to explore it, which allows us to appreciate, with the wise men, the consequences of Christ being born for us.