
An Epiphany People: God's light to the Nations

Today's Feast of the Epiphany is perhaps one of the most neglected feasts in the Western Church. Although it's an important holiday in many countries, and in other traditions, Epiphany has simply never caught on in mainstream Australian culture, because it's been eclipsed by Christmas. Epiphany asks the questions: Where do we see God to be present among us? What are the signs of the sacred among us? It is with that quest, that search, that discovery, that we concern ourselves today.

Epiphany is traditionally the feast of the 'Three Wise Men', or the Magi, meaning magicians or astrologers. This unlikely and slightly exotic trio comes seemingly out of nowhere, searching for the one who is born King of the Jews. Appearing only once, in this story of Jesus' birth recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, they then disappear from Scripture as suddenly as they first appeared. But the point of their journey remains forever important. They are the first to understand what others could not see: that this is no ordinary child. This Jesus has been born king of the Jews. This Jesus is God among us. For the ancient Church, this 'epiphany' or this exciting new understanding of the Christ was worth celebrating. It still is.

The Gospels are full of moments of epiphany in which we see the divine being made manifest, moments when we see Jesus at work, and we will read of them throughout the coming Epiphany season. These epiphanies are reminders that this Jesus is more than just a friend we can turn to when we are seeking a listening ear, more even than a prophet. As we read of Jesus' journeys throughout Galilee, as we listen to his stories and parables, we see something exciting happening: God is with us, the Divine is made known among us.

In the narrative, Magi, perhaps astrologers, but certainly wise men of the time, followed a special star that had arisen in the night sky. Their calculations predicted that this meant the birth of a great king. We're not told much about them, and we don't know how much of this story is mythology, but the story suggests that they knew the stars and understood their meaning. They arrived in Jerusalem looking for this special child, and their presence worries Herod, whose scribes remind him

that the predicted Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Matthew's birth narrative is colourful. It shows us the drama of the story, and places it in the wider context of God's revelation to the world, but there is also a background of darkness and intrigue, with Jesus' birth arousing fear and jealousy in Herod, who lashed out viciously to prevent any erosion of his power. But the star leads the Magi to the child and we're told they worshipped him, bringing gifts, and then returned home by another route.

This story topples down the barriers between people and proclaims that Jesus came into the world for everyone. Isaiah's prophecy lies right at the centre of this story. 'Arise shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...' Faith isn't a private or interior matter; it impels community and life in community. It shows us that mission has to be central to our lives together here as church in Williamstown. A church isn't designed to only be a comforting community for those on the inside, it's designed for the world, and our role is to take our experience of God, our understanding of Emmanuel, God is with us, out into our community. The church that doesn't look out beyond its own boundaries is sentenced to become a mysterious ghetto existing on the fringe of society, and contributing nothing to its life. To live is to look outward, an outward looking that deals with change. A changing church is a sign of the life within.

Epiphany teaches us that we shouldn't be selective in our thinking about other people; about our ideas of who belongs and who doesn't belong, who are outsiders, and who are insiders. Epiphany teaches us that all we do as a parish in this coming year should be aimed at taking the message of Christmas 'God is with us', our experience of how this is true in our lives out to the world; expanding the boundaries of our community and finding ways to meet our neighbours just where they are, finding ways to live out the gospel message among them, finding ways to push out our comfort zone.

When the magi finally arrived at Bethlehem, after their long and arduous journey to find the Christchild, they worshipped, bringing their gifts. Matthew sets up a deliberate contrast here between the gentile Magi, who responded with worship from their hearts, and Herod, who despite all his understanding of Scripture, despite being a Jewish insider, only offered a pretence of doing so. Worship should be central to the Church's life, the place where this kind of looking out begins. The purpose in our

coming together Sunday by Sunday is not just to have a warm fuzzy experience, not only to meet with our friends, important as these things are - but to worship God together in community. In the incarnation we received the greatest gift, the gift of the Christ. That gift moves us to worship, to offer all that we are and all that we have to this gracious mystery through the outpouring of ourselves, of our lives at the feet of the Christ, born for us, Immanuel. Christian worship is the bending of our lives to the grace of God that has become incarnate in the world as Jesus Christ. God is present to us, God has revealed himself to us, God has come to us. Worship isn't just the human projection of our wants, but our fitting response to the presence of God among us.

The magi brought their gifts and laid them before the child. They offered their gold, all that was valuable and precious in their lives, all their giftedness. They brought frankincense, a symbol of all that was sacred, all that was holy, all their spiritual gifts and laid it before him. But they didn't stop there; they brought their myrrh, all the bitterness and pain, all the sadness, all the unholy messiness and they laid that before him too, and they worshipped. The discovery of the sacred often comes out of some of the darkest times in our lives.

As we come together to worship should we bring all that we have and all that we are to the feet of the Christchild; honest people, people with light and shade, broken people, holy people. It's the least we can give, the least we can do. And as we offer our gifts, as we encounter the Christchild, our lives are transformed, touched by his holiness, by his love.

And so as we begin this new year together, let us become an epiphany people; people who grapple to understand what it means to be the Church in the Market Place, open to peoples' needs, open to living out the life and Spirit of the gospel in this region, the region where God has placed us. Let us become people who are open to the sacred in our lives, open to epiphanies that help us to understand more about the divine and more about ourselves. Let us become people for whom true worship is central, worship that brings everything we have and everything we are to the feet of the living God in adoration and praise. And then, we'll become people who are empowered to share the light of with those around us.

Epiphany 2008