

## EPIPHANY FOR ALL

Matthew 2:1-12  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Isaiah 60:1-6

Imagine the scene: a brightly lit sweet-shop window of the old fashioned sort. You know, a proper sweet shop, with a bow-fronted, small-paned window, filled with jars and jars of brightly coloured, wonderfully shaped sweets. Perhaps the snow is falling and the daylight is dying, and standing before the window, their noses pressed to its panes, are two or three ragged children, gazing and gazing, longing and longing, but you know that looking is all that they are going to be able to do.

Or imagine another scene, of a brightly lit home, again in winter-time. Outside the light is dying and so the light from within glows warmly through the windows. You are outside, and looking in you can see a warm fire and a table spread with a wonderful meal. There are people there, several generations of the same family, all laughing and playing. But this is not your family. You have no such home to go to, and so you turn from all this goodness with a sigh.

Sentimental imaginings maybe. But the sentiments that they evoke are those which the Epiphany of Christ counteracts for all time. The revelation of Christ to the nations means that now no one should ever have to stand outside God's family looking in with longing; no one should ever view the delights of God's blessings but turn away knowing that they are not for them. With the coming of the wise men from the East, Matthew tells us that Christ is for everyone.

We make a romantic story out of the wise men. But what does Matthew actually say? He says that after Jesus was born - no mention of how long afterwards - wise men from the East came to Jerusalem looking for the child born to be King of the Jews, saying that something they had observed in the heavens had led them to conclude that there was such a child.

Just this week Andrew asked me where the star went, where it is now. Good question. The answer begs another: what did they see? Scholars have had different views on this. Halley's comet appeared in 12-11 BC, but that would be just a bit too early for this story. It could have been some kind of supernova, which we would know nothing of now. More likely is something which astronomers can know by working backwards and calculating the movement of the planets: the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC. Jupiter was the royal or kingly planet, and Saturn was in some systems thought to represent the Jews; and so the conclusion would be obvious. Whatever it was that happened in the skies, thoughtful astronomers and astrologists (the two were synonymous in the ancient world) would seek out the earthly counterpart. The general belief in those days, and which went on far beyond those days, was that strange events in the skies meant something important happening on the earth, and the wise thing to do was to read the signs and find out what they meant.

So they are wise men. They aren't people who act on whim and change their opinions with the seasons. In their own countries people would look up to them and

respect their opinions. And from their reception in Jerusalem, it seems that their wisdom was respected there as well. If not why should Herod and all Jerusalem be troubled? Why not just laugh them off as some foreign cranks? For they didn't. And one of the reasons Matthew tells us this story at all is because it is political dynamite. By coming to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews, and not finding him there, Matthew is telling us that the old King of the Jews, Herod, is just an impostor. The wise visitors were not welcomed for their message: they were feared. But they were respected for their wisdom, and perhaps also for their riches.

For they were rich, they must have been, to offer the gifts that they did, gifts that would usually be given to royalty or even presented in their temples before the gods. So they are wise and they are rich, but most of all they represent variety. Without their arrival, the birth of Jesus would just be a Jewish affair, of limited interest and relevance. But Matthew, who is writing primarily for a Jewish Christian audience, wants to be clear from the outset that Jesus is more than a Jewish Messiah. He is the King of the Jews, but not just King for the Jews. Hasn't Isaiah, in one of the Messianic prophecies, said that "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn"? (Isaiah 60:3)

In fact, this story of the wise men from the east is part of a frame for the whole gospel story. It begins with Jesus' Jewish genealogy, and then this story of wise foreigners coming to see him soon after his birth, giving him royal or divine gifts, and hailing him as the King of the Jews. It ends with him coming face to face with Pilate, the representative of the world's greatest King, Caesar. Pilate has rather different gifts to give him, which mock the idea of his royalty, but his soldiers are the first foreigners since the magi to call him "King of the Jews." Of course, the crown they give him is of thorns and his throne is the cross. At that moment, instead of the bright star there is great darkness and out of the darkness, it is a gentile, a foreign voice which says, "Yes, he really was the Son of God."

The coming of the magi represents God's Kingdom, God's family being opened up to everyone. Up until this point God's love was given primarily to one nation. It was his special family, and part of the family firm of "God and sons". But now, in the sending of the firstborn Son to be King for the whole world, God is in fact opening up the family business. It isn't so much that it is becoming "God plc", with the family element excluded, but more that now the family is open to all to join. It is open to all, and God will make no difference between those who were first in the family and those who come in later. There are no two tiers in this family, and those who come in later are not there as an afterthought.

St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is where we find the most thought-through picture of God's plan and of the church. There, as we read this morning, the mysterious plan of God is opened up for us. And that plan always was that Gentiles, foreigners - us - we should become fellow-heirs of God, and members of the same body of Jewish believers, sharers in the same promise through Jesus. This was always God's plan, that the whole world and everyone in it should be a part of his Kingdom. Jesus coming, his reception by foreigners, is the event that puts this final part of the plan into operation. He opens the door to us and welcomes us in.

There need never be any standing outside the sweet-shop window, lusting after what we cannot have, because in Christ the riches of heaven are given to us. There is no

need for us to stand out in the cold, lonely and unloved, watching with envy the joy of those who celebrate with love in the warmth: in Christ God has opened the family to us all. No one can ever be say with any truth that “Jesus doesn’t want to have anything to do with the likes of me.” or “The church isn’t for my sort.” He does and it is. Any who stay outside the window looking in now, do so because that is their choice, not God’s - so long as they have been told that they belong and are welcome. If people feel that the church doesn’t welcome them, or that Christ doesn’t welcome them, then the church has failed in its duty to make God’s welcome known.

God’s plan, Paul tells us, is that in the end the rich variety of the church should show God’s wisdom, not only to the world, but also to all hidden spiritual principles. God didn’t want one uniform people, held together by birth and regulations. God made the rich variety of people in the world because he wanted to bring the richness of their variety to form and inform the church.

Wisdom, richness and variety, and we are back to the wise visitors from the east again, the fore-runners of God’s plan, the sign that God’s King is for all, not just for some. May he be King for us, as individuals, as a church, as a community and as a nation. For we all need his Kingship, keeping us humble, by showing us our place beside him: raising us up, by showing us our place at his side, in his family. We all need his Kingship to remind us that our lives are not our own and our decisions are not our own, to give us rules and standards by which we can live and be guided. We all need God’s Kingship, for it is when we accept it that he can also give us his gifts of love and life forever.