

SERMON – EPIPHANY, 2 JANUARY 2022 – EPH 3.1-12, MATT 2.1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here we are on 2nd January, and I'm already thinking "it's an odd year." I don't seem to have done shepherds and angels at all this Christmas – that's what comes when Crib services are cancelled and you use the John reading for Midnight and Christmas morning. No shepherds, no angels, and now three Wise Men have arrived four days early. "Tain't right, tain't proper". It's a bit ironic that, with our schools not back for a while yet, we've gone back to the twelve days of Christmas, twelve holiday days leading to Twelfth Night, Epiphany, the Feast of the Kings. Fill the mead cup, drain the barrel – fa la la la la la. Next Sunday evening, 6 pm at St Edmund's, we are going to do an Epiphany Carol Service – a chance to sing those carols we haven't sung yet, listen to some lovely music, and hear the bible readings and some other lovely poetry and prose. Do come and celebrate – if we don't make an effort to worship, to do more, to come together, then 2022 is going to be as dismal as 2021, as much as a struggle as 2020 – and our politicians are right, we have got to learn to live with all this (which means our NHS needs much better funding than it's had for a while).

In our churches we will continue our Christmas celebrations – we will continue the Christmas and Epiphany theme right through till Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which we'll mark with a joint service here on Sunday 30 January. In normal times we have processions, we have candles – I don't know if we'll manage that this year, but we'll try. We'll ensure there's a Zoom option too, we'll help those who – quite understandably – don't want to mix with others. We'll do our best, it's all we can do.

We ended 2019 on a high, having had a great Bicentenary year. If anyone had told me then that we were about to be hit by a pandemic, close our churches for several months, lose a third of our congregations, nearly all our children, and be failing to pay Parish Share for several years in a row, I would have told them not to be so negative. But that's where we are now. I must celebrate the positives – the fact we are open and still alive, the baptisms, weddings, zoom, the good humour that we've all journeyed with, the fact that we've come through – but we're not where I wanted us to be after 5½ years of my ministry here. I wish the future was clear and positive, but it isn't.

On the other hand, I started 2022 by taking a Lateral Flow Test. Stick it up your nose, twiddle it round, do the test – and it's negative. On this occasion, negative is a good thing. As I said, it's an odd year!

Let's forget it all, and go back to our wonderful, mystical Gospel. "Three Kings from Persian lands afar" and all that.

My dad was a teacher, so every year he'd be artistic in the run up to Christmas, and I remember one year we got huge faces of the three kings, made by his class. They were too good to throw away at the end of term, so they came home – hung on our stairs for what seemed like months.

Like most families in those far-off days, Christmas Eve meant the service from King's College Chapel, and – since we lived near Cambridge – at some point in the new year we would go into the Chapel, in those days you just walk in, look at Rubens painting over the High Altar, the Adoration of the Magi. We'd look at the stunning roof vaulting of the chapel, built by Henry VIII, we'd look at the vivid colours of the stained glass. Mum would tell us that when she was a child all this glass, and the Rubens, had been removed into safe storage during the War, she'd tell us that she knew the War was over when her dad had come back from the fighting and he'd taken her into the Chapel to see the glass that had returned – and while grandad wouldn't talk about the War, he'd be happy to take us for a walk through the Colleges, and tell us different stories, show us amazing things. So again, all those memories and experiences, are ravelled together with magi and glory.

In my little Baptist church, everything was much simpler. If we had "Kings from Persian lands afar" it would be played on a record – I'll explain to you youngsters what a record was. But we'd have TS Eliot, "A cold coming we had of it" and we'd sing "We three Kings of Orient are, one on a motorbike, one in a car". As the years passed, and my worship became more Anglican, we'd celebrate with processions and incense and real gold, frankincense and myrrh. I love the Epiphany – stained glass windows, colours, light, wonder.

The Epiphany linked in too with my love of history. Henry VIII and his chapel at King's – although Henry VII had started the building, and Henry VI had founded the College. We'd go to Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk, where you can see Anne Boleyn's initials embroidered in the tapestry, we'd go to Hatfield House in Hertfordshire where Elizabeth learned she was Queen. Later we'd visit Hampton Court, and you cannot see Henry VIII and his ladies in the corridor, or worship in the Chapel Royal, without seeing the magnificence, and imagining the Kings.

It was linked in too with wise men, mainly men – the men I'd meet as we walked round Cambridge. Granny worked for Selwyn College as a hostel keeper, grandad for the Zoology department as caretaker – but if we were out for a walk with them, it was normal to stop and be introduced. I remember first

meeting the Reverend Professor Sir Owen Chadwick, Master of Selwyn College, an incredible historian – being very overawed. 20 years later I preached at Selwyn College and he was in the congregation – one of the most frightening audiences I’ve ever had!

Epiphany was linked in too with dad’s love of astronomy. As a teenager he’d written to Patrick Moore, and he’d kept the reply. He had a telescope and sometimes we go out in to the darkness and look up. It was exciting just to be out late, well after dark, and he’d show us the moon, the planets, stars, comets. He never got me really hooked on it – I think I’d get cold and bored quite quickly – but I don’t remember that. I do remember the excitement and the wow factor, and I could relate to wise men looking up and seeing a star.

Epiphany is a response of faith. History feeds our faith, buildings feed our faith, the people we journey with feed our faith, our response to creation – all part of our faith. But our faith must be centred on Christ. The Magi, the Wise Men, were scholars, travellers, men of God. We’re not sure what sort of God they worshipped, presumably it wasn’t Yahweh, the God of the Jews, but there was certainly a God-shaped space in their lives. For the majority of human beings, even now, there is a God-shaped space in their lives, and all of us need to cultivate our relationship with God. We are made in the image of God and need to see our lives in relationship with Him. We are better human beings when we include God in our lives, when we spend time and energy in prayer, when we make space for worship, when we read our bibles and seek to journey with God. The Magi knew this – and when God sent them a sign, they were alert, and they worked out what it meant. Then they went to find the Messiah.

It is worth noting that the official priests and scribes also knew where the Messiah was to be born, they knew their scriptures, they understood the prophecies – but they didn’t bother to go and find the Messiah. Too comfortable where they were, too afraid of Herod. Let’s just keep doing what we’ve always done, and not search for something new. There might be a moral in that for all of us.

I love the picture of the wise men arriving in Bethlehem – and now it seems that Mary, Joseph and Jesus are in a house. We assume the baby has grown up a bit, the crowds have left Bethlehem, they’ve found somewhere they can live, and a carpenter can always find work. Who knows what happened, what the neighbours thought when kings arrived – it’s lovely to imagine. Who knows what they made of a child, how much they understood the concept of the Messiah, of God’s gift – who knows how it affected their lives, their future? Were they better kings, better rulers – who knows?

As we imagine, as we picture, don't just wonder about them – extend the wonder to ourselves. Let's be a church of joy and excitement, of purpose and faith – as we meet in worship, as we welcome people for baptisms, marriages and funerals, as we talk about green issues, churchyard maintenance, and everything else that 2022 will bring. See the beauty, see the joy, see the celebration, see the wow, look up and see the stars, open the book and read the stories. Be men and women of joy and excitement, of purpose and faith – and share all that with those around us.

Peter Barham
1 January 2022