

## **EPIPHANY REDISCOVERED**

Isaiah 60. 1 – 6  
Ephesians 3. 1-12  
Matthew 2. 1 – 12

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

According to a modern dictionary, if we say that we have had an ‘epiphany’, it means that we suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way. An epiphany is an ‘Aha!’ moment; a moment when we make an important discovery; a moment when we suddenly perceive the essential nature or meaning of something. If you look at recent scientific history, a number of epiphany or ‘Aha!’ moments have been recorded, including the discovery of a vaccine against polio; the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA; and the discovery of the virus that causes AIDS.

In the Bible, ‘epiphany’ technically means ‘appearing’ or ‘appearance’, and this word is used in the New Testament to describe Christ’s ‘appearing’ in judgement at the end of history. ‘Appearing’, for example, was St Paul’s favourite term for what we call the second coming of Christ.

But in terms of the liturgical year of the Christian Church, Epiphany refers to something very specific. As we have seen in our gospel text from St Matthew, Epiphany refers to the ‘appearance’ of a star in the heavens which ultimately led the wise men to the Christ Child. And as we will see in a moment, on a second and more profound level, for the wise men, Epiphany also meant the

‘appearance’ of our Lord to them personally, as he revealed the fulness of his identity to them.

Although we have come to call the wise men the ‘Three Kings of the Orient’ in modern times, there is no proof that they were kings at all, or even that there were three of them. No, these wise men were in fact astrologers, non-Jewish star gazers from Persia, present-day Iraq and Iran. They were pagan priests and seers, men who specialised in the interpretation of dreams and visions and in the explanation of signs and omens. In the first century, those who could ‘read the stars’ were respected people of power and prestige. These people were listened to by kings; their words had weight. It is for this reason that King Herod and all Jerusalem with him were frightened, when the wise men came to Jerusalem asking, ‘where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’

As we look again at this well-known story of Epiphany, we can ask ourselves, ‘What do we notice about these strange wise men?’<sup>1</sup> The first thing that we may notice is that *they came seeking*.

When the wise men arrive in Herod’s court, they make no bones about their search. They were looking for a king, a king who would give order to life, a king who would protect them, a king who would give them guidance and be a leader to whom they could turn. The wise men came seeking a Jewish King. They did not know the Hebrew Torah; they couldn’t recite the Ten Commandments; and they probably knew nothing about Jewish prophecy. But somehow these wise men had been given a spiritual hunger and they came to

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<sup>1</sup> One fundamental thing that they teach us (and which is not the focus of this particular sermon) is the story of the Epiphany is the story of Jesus being revealed to all the nations of the world.

the house where the Christ child was, knowing that they needed to be following the One who was above them. They came seeking and searching. 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'

Today, men and women still seek in a similar way. There is a hunger in our hearts that is never satisfied until we at last have found our connection with God. It is in every human soul. St Augustine of Hippo reminds us that we are all seekers when he says, 'God, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.'

Sometimes, in our search for God, we look for him in places where he cannot be found. We make mistakes. Matthew's gospel tells us that this was true even of the wise men. They followed the star to Jerusalem, looking for the king of the Jews, and made the unfortunate decision to look for him in Herod's court. One of Herod's titles was 'king of the Jews' after all. But he was not the king whom the wise men were seeking.

In spite of the wise men's error, God finally led them to the house of Jesus and they were able to be in the right place at the right time. Like the wise men, if we have taken some wrong turns in our search for God, we must not be put off. We must continue until we come before him and know him.

Today, if any of us have come to church searching for God, we've come to the right place. If we have come here hungry for an experience of God, or for an encounter with real truth, we've come to the right place. Here, we can meet the God who will not let us down, and discover the wondrous resources that he makes available to us. You may not have realised it, but St Stephen's is an

‘Aha!’ place; this is a place where epiphany and revelation happen. This is a place where God reveals himself.

In verse 11 of our text, we are told that on coming to the house, the wise men ‘saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.’<sup>2</sup> The second thing that we can notice about the wise men is that *they knelt seeing*.

What a scene we have before us! After a long and undoubtedly complicated journey, and after having looked for our Lord in the wrong place, the foreign and Gentile wise men bump their heads on the low doorway of a small hut where a peasant couple is struggling to raise its first-born child. And when they *see* Jesus (who by this time might even have been a toddler), the pagan astrologers fall to their feeble knees in worship. Their *epiphany* was also a *theophany*: they saw, and recognised that Jesus is the Son of God.

There, before the Son of God incarnate, the wise men offered our Lord gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.<sup>3</sup> As they offered Jesus these gifts, the wise men knew that they had found the Christ and they worshipped him. One well-known church leader wrote that ‘worship is the believer’s response of all that they are – mind, emotions, will and body – to what God is and says and does’. To worship is to admire, adore, respect and revere.

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<sup>2</sup> As the wise men worshipped, they were overjoyed. The literal translation of the Greek text in verse 10 is ‘and they rejoiced with a joy, a great one, indeed an exceedingly great one.’

<sup>3</sup> Gold, of course, was a precious metal in those days, and was fit to be offered to a king. Here, the wise men made this gift to Jesus, the one who would become the King of Kings. Frankincense, on the other hand, was an aromatic gum resin which was used for incense by priests; and in giving Christ this gift, the wise men were honouring our Lord the High Priest who would create an eternal bridge between God and his people. And as for myrrh, a spice that was used to embalm the dead, the wise men offered this to Jesus in recognition of his forthcoming suffering, when he would take upon himself the sufferings and sins of humanity.

We will have accomplished our reason for being here today if we have truly worshipped God. For worship is more than singing beautiful hymns, as much as we like to sing them; it is more than following a liturgical pattern, as important as that is; and it is surely more than enduring one of my sermons. Worship is making a vital connection with God. It is coming before him and knowing him, in a deep sense.

Like the wise men, when we find ourselves on our knees in worship before our Lord, we make a great discovery. Totally unexpectedly, we experience yet even another “Aha!” moment. We discover that the One whom we have been seeking *has been searching for us*. You and I may not know it, but God is *searching for you and me* much more than we have been looking for him. It is God’s nature to come to us, to search us out, to meet us on the journey, and to make himself known to us. God yearns to be known. God is an encountering God, and that is the reason that the wise men found Jesus. They followed where they were beckoned; they were willing to look for a king in unlikely places; and when they finally found the king of the Jews, they encountered the living God.

As we stand at the threshold of this New Year, let *us* seek the Lord while he may be found. Let *us* call upon him and find him near. Let us worship Christ and crown him Lord of all. Let us follow him, and follow him faithfully.

Amen.