

Epiphany 2018

A few days ago we decided that we had become tired of Christmas and took down all our Christmas decorations. We are not bah mug-bug people but we had tired of the clutter of Christmas.

When we put up our Christmas tree, I was full of the expectation of Christmas, the thrill and anticipation that I experience every year but now that it is over, and life begins to get back to normal. I cannot wait for that normality to return.

Today we mark the feast of Epiphany. We remember the arrival of the Wise Men, the Magi, who had followed the star because they realised a great event was to happen. Whilst I may be bored with the earthly clutter of Christmas, I am ever thrilled by the magic and beauty of the whole story of the Incarnation. Here we see a real example of faith in action. The Magi were a bit like Christopher Columbus setting out to discover the New World. When he set out, Columbus did not know where he was going. When he got there he did not know where he was and when he got back, he was not sure about where he had been.

The Wise Men did not know that the Star was going to lead them to the manger in Bethlehem where they would chance upon the birth of a King. Here in these simple surroundings, the Saviour of the world was born. They brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold is highly valued now and it was considered a precious and expensive metal even in biblical times. Its value in the eyes of the biblical characters made it a valuable gift to Jesus. Gold means power and riches and symbolised that Jesus was going to be King.

Frankincense, also known as olibanum, is a type of resin extruded from the Boswellia tree. The resin is milky and hardens once it has been exposed to air. This resin was, and is, valued as a fragrant incense or perfume. Today it is a treatment for illnesses such as arthritis but it held medicinal value in biblical times as well. It was prized for its fragrance and therefore presented as a valuable and reverent gift to Jesus. Frankincense would show that Jesus is the Son of God and a holy man. In those days the little blocks of amber coloured resin from the trees would be burnt in Temples to produce a sweet smelling smoke.

Myrrh, like frankincense, is a type of resin taken from plants of the genus

Commiphora. The word “myrrh” comes from the Arabic term for bitter. It has antiseptic as well as anti-inflammatory properties, which give it medicinal functions. The ancients used myrrh as incense, much like frankincense, and considered it a rare and precious gift. Myrrh was used to prepare bodies for burial. This sweet smelling gum comes from the myrrh plant and was used as a perfume and as incense and was also use in the embalming process. It signified that Jesus would be an important man and would prepare him for his death. As the verse from the great Epiphany hymn, “Earth has many a noble city”, puts it;

“Sacred gifts of mystic meaning:
Incense doth their God disclose,
Gold the King of kings proclaimeth,
Myrrh His sepulchre foreshows.”

and we see the Wise Men appear at the simple, uncluttered manger bringing gifts that symbolise the salvation history that is to unfold as we move through the Church year.

The name "Epiphany" comes from the Greek word *Epiphania*, and means "to show, make known, or reveal." The celebration originated in the Eastern Church in AD 361, beginning as a commemoration of the birth of Christ. Later, additional meanings were added - the visit of the Magi, Christ's baptism in the Jordan River, and his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, which is the gospel reading for the Sunday after next. These three events are central to the definition of Epiphany, and its meaning is drawn from these occurrences.

While some Greek Orthodox Churches still observe the Epiphany celebration as the Nativity of Jesus, the majority of the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican Churches focus on the visit of the Magi and Jesus' baptism, which is the theme for next Sunday. The significance behind the visit of the Magi is the revelation of Christ as "Lord and King." The Wise Men were the first Gentiles to publicly recognize the divinity of Jesus, by way of their offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

This year marks a very important stage in the history of our parish, as we become untied from the United Benefice and become a parish in our own right. Wednesday will be the final day that an objection can be made and on 1st February it will come in to force.

As the coming of the Magi to the manger was a significant event, so the new-found status of being a parish in our own right, again, gives us the challenge to think about how we are going to operate as a parish in our own right.

Could I suggest that we have a lot to learn from our first cousins, the Methodists, who every year use this Sunday as their Covenant Sunday. They read out the Covenant, written by John Wesley, which has been printed on this week's pew sheet.

"I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,

exalted for you, or brought low for you;

let me be full,

let me be empty,

let me have all things,

let me have nothing:

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things

to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven." Amen.

As Epiphany marked the beginning of the vision of Jesus to the Gentile world, so let this Epiphany be a Covenant time for us as we seek to serve God in this place following the suggestion of Wesley in his Covenant. Perhaps we could use it as a sort of personal faith mantra for the coming year? Please take the pew sheet home and reflect on what John Wesley is asking us to think about.

Let us use this time of Epiphany to look again at our faith and reflect as we go through this “uncluttered” season to see the way in which Jesus revealed himself to us as Lord and Saviour.

Amen.