

The season of Christmas is finally drawing to a close. The decorations will soon be down and put away for another year. Trips to family or their visits to us are now just memories.

This Sunday, the closest to the Feast of the Epiphany, we read as our Gospel reading the last of the Christmas events, the visit of the Magi (as told to us by St Matthew). The Gospel writer tells us very little, who they were, where precisely they came from – simply that they had come from the East. The East carries connotations of mystery, of difference. These men came not just from beyond Judaism, they came from beyond the boundary of the known world. They came bearing magnificent gifts that seem strangely out of place in a bare stable.

Christmas is a season of contrasts, even of contradictions, of paradox. At the heart of it lies the ultimate paradox – beautifully expressed in the words of a hymn by Graham Kendrick (No 228)

Hymn 228

1 Meekness and majesty,
manhood and deity,
in perfect harmony –
the man who is God:

.....

Lord of infinity,
stooping so tenderly,
lifts our humanity
to the heights of his throne.

As we move from Christmas and on into the season of Epiphany we think of God's revelation of himself in Christ moving out beyond the barriers of race, of culture, of class.

As I said, our Gospel account is very short on detail, giving us just the barest outline of what prompted the journey of the Magi. "We saw his star in the east and have come to worship." Why that particular star? We find them on a journey of faith – we have a picture of men of culture, of some sophistication, worshipping a child, in a cattle shed, in a town they had never heard of. It is a story of contrasts, of contradictions yet one driven by an inner conviction that drove them, that guided them – an inner star, an inner light as important, as real as any they saw in the night sky.

We find ourselves on a journey of faith which to the outsider seems just as incongruous, just as illogical as that undertaken by the Magi. What has led us to put our faith in a Galilean preacher, born into the home of a carpenter, executed by the Romans nearly 2000 years ago?

At one level it doesn't make sense – and yet we meet here Sunday by Sunday because that same Jesus has touched our lives. There is that inner conviction, that inner light as real as any star in the night sky, which prompts that same question 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews?' For some of us that is so clear – for others it starts as an irritation that will not go away – whatever it is we have to respond, to follow the light that shines, or maybe just flickers in our hearts.

How is it that Christ has made himself known – what is it that has drawn people to him across barriers of time and culture? In his days on earth he was clearly someone who made an impression on those who heard him. We read later in St Matthew's Gospel 'The crowd were so amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the Law.' (Matt 7:28,29)

But it is on the Cross, that sign of apparent defeat and humiliation, where Jesus made his most profound impact. As Jesus died, the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross declaring, 'Truly this man was the Son of God.' Moments of encounter, moments of meeting, of revelation, of Epiphany. The meeting with Mary Magdalene in the Garden that turned sadness into joy. The meeting on the Emmaus Road that transformed two men in total despair, sending them back to Jerusalem. Maybe you can think of your own moments of encounter, when God seemed particularly close, when his love for you in Christ has really struck a chord in your heart – or just when the sheer wonder of God has broken through.

He comes to us of course as we gather for worship, fulfilling his promise that when 'two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' He is here – even when in the dullness of my heart, my preoccupation with other things, or just in my worry or anxiety I may not recognise him – but he is here, ministering to my needs.

Jesu, Jesu, I thee adore.
Help me love thee more and more.

He is of course not confined to any building or liturgy; he is not confined in my thoughts or my feelings. He is also present in, as we are reminded in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, in the poor and the marginalised, in the lonely.

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was sick and you cared for me; I was in prison and you visited me.'

Lord, when did we see you hungry, or sick, or in prison ...?'

'As much as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me?'

As we think about this Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the point we often miss is not that the sheep recognised the Lord in the poor and the marginalised and the goats did not – the real point is that neither of them did for both protest, 'Lord when did we see you hungry, or sick, or in prison.....?' Whereas the goats imply that if only they had realised that it was the Lord and not just some worthless 'bum in the gutter' then of course they would have helped; the sheep on the other hand did the right thing not for the sake of any reward or recognition but simply because it was the right thing to do. As they act in the name of Christ, they discover that they meet that same Christ in the one they serve.

Now I have been talking so far of how does Christ make himself known – all my thoughts have been on how can I experience him. Now this is all right up to a point but it can lead to a slightly selfish , self-centred approach as I look for more and more ways of ME meeting Jesus, ME experiencing Jesus, ME developing a deeper spirituality, a deeper prayer life.

There is nothing wrong in any of these things in themselves so long as the focus remains on God and not on my experience of God. For the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats begs the fundamental question, not of ‘How can I experience Jesus?’ rather that of ‘How can others experience Jesus in me?’

Again I find myself going to one of our hymns (636). These poems set to music so often encapsulate in a few words deep spiritual truths – the combination of word and music means they stay in our minds long after the preacher has left the pulpit.

May the mind of Christ my saviour
live in me from day to day;
by his love and power controlling
all I do and say.

Allowing the God I meet in worship, in other people, in those moments of encounter, the still small voice, when God breaks through in the ordinary things of life. Allowing that same God more and more authority in my life – until my life, your life, in all its limitations and inadequacies, shows forth something of the life and love of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world he came to save.

That is Epiphany – that is God making himself known in the world.