

(Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12)

So, if the ‘first day of Christmas’ is Christmas Day then good old-fashioned logic tells us that the ‘twelfth night’ will be tonight. And yet, each year some of us do the same old sums – probably using fingers and thumbs! – to work it out. For some of us, this is another of those cherished Christmas traditions.

Twelfth night is the prelude to the Feast of the Epiphany – when we celebrate the visit to Bethlehem by ‘Wise Men from the East’. And Epiphany is a major festival in the life of the Church – which is why we have translated it to today, to ensure we don’t miss it.

The key point for us to remember – and to celebrate as part of the good news of the Christmas message – is that this visit by the Wise Men signifies Jesus being revealed – *manifested* – as the Saviour of *all* nations, not just his own.

It is interesting to note that in the Church’s lectionary there is only one set of readings for Epiphany, but what wonderful readings they are! Each year, as we hear that same set, we are reminded that it is only Matthew who relates the Wise Men’s visit. As he makes clear, this visit was some time after Jesus was born.

And yet our popular understanding of the Christmas story is that somehow their visit almost coincided with that of the humble shepherds – who were the first to receive this good news of great joy.

This good news of Jesus coming as Saviour of the whole world is so great that twelve days is simply not enough for us to take it in, to celebrate, to reflect. We need forty days – which actually symbolises a long time: perhaps a lifetime. But forty days from Christmas Day takes us through to the second of February – a calculation for which we probably need a pen and paper as well as a lot of fingers and thumbs!

The fortieth day of Christmas is another major festival in the life of the Church, and it is now known as Candlemas. Candlemas is when we remember the young Jesus being Presented in the Temple – where he was acknowledged to be the long-awaited ‘light to lighten the nations’. No number of candles could help us mark such a revelation, but in keeping the Festival of *Candlemas* we do try! And just like Epiphany, Candlemas is so important that it is translated to the nearest Sunday, so that we don’t miss it. Fortunately for us, this year the second of February will fall on a Sunday, so Candlemas will have special resonance.

In fact, that resonance will be deepened further as we will be visited then by a wise man from about 3 miles to the East, John Dobson, the Dean of Ripon Cathedral, who will be our preacher. If any of you have been to a Candlemas celebration at our Cathedral then you will know that he knows a thing or two about the meaning of Candlemas!

But to return to the present, and the three presents given by the Wise Men, we are invited today to think about the meaning of their visit. The gold and the frankincense we can easily understand: Jesus was being acknowledged as a King, and no ordinary king: his divinity merited worship. But the myrrh was pointing forward to the whole reason for this royal birth: as we know, Jesus could not suffer and die for us without first being born as one of us.

This is why Candlemas is so important: it is a turning point in the annual cycle of the Church. We cease to look back towards the birth of Jesus and we begin to look forward to his Passion.

TS Eliot captures this profoundly in his poem, 'The Journey of the Magi'. He writes:
'...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods...'

In the coming weeks, we will be reflecting on the various ways – besides the visit of the Wise Men – in which Jesus was manifested as the Son of God; when he 'revealed his glory'. Next week for example, we will celebrate the Baptism of Christ – when a voice came from heaven saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. And in three weeks' time we will examine his first 'Sign': the turning of water into wine.

And even after these forty days of Christmas, we will need yet more time to take in the gravity of what is being revealed to us.

As we look on at world events, and at local situations, we see such a challenge to our conviction that God is able to redeem the world. We see how climate change is seeming to take hold, from Australia to the ice caps. We see how communities, nations and economic unions seem to be sleep-walking towards conflict and disagreement. We see how bad things continue to happen to good people.

But we need – and God needs us – to bring all these things to him in prayer. Only then can he open our eyes to what is really going on and to the part we must play in the process of redemption; only then can he reveal to us – manifest to us – his power and his glory.

The spiritual writer Michael Mayne said this about prayer:

'...the proper relationship in prayer is that we attend upon God in order to hear what God wills, and we do that by inviting God's dynamic, loving energy (which we call the Holy Spirit) that is at our centre *to open our eyes*. We commonly [think of] the Holy Spirit... as the source of power, but in fact he enables us not by making us

supernaturally strong but by opening our eyes. He opens our eyes to Christ, to... our fellow man or woman, to the point of need; to the heart-breaking brutality and equally heart-breaking beauty of the world.'

Today, Epiphany in 2020, is when we are assured that God is ever offering to open our eyes (with 20-20 vision!). Are we prepared to allow him to do so, or do we want to see only what we want to see?

I close with these words of praise from Psalm 19, which I re-discovered just yesterday, words that seem to fit in with all that Epiphany means.

'The law of the LORD is perfect,
and revives the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
and gives wisdom to the simple;
the statutes of the LORD are right,
and rejoice the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
and gives light to the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
and endures for ever;
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than *gold*,
more than much fine gold.'

Thanks be to God. Amen.