

Epiphany Sermon 2022

Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Words from St Matthew's Gospel, the second chapter beginning to read at the 11th verse. Amen.

Today we celebrate the feast of Epiphany - or 'manifestation'. It's a feast which celebrates the appearance or manifestation to the world of who Christ really is. In the Church's history it's been associated with the Baptism of Christ, the miracle at the Wedding of Cana, and as we celebrate today the visit of the Magi bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Traditionally all of these events took place on the same day of the year, and all of them reveal to us, make manifest who Christ is.

The odd gifts which the magi bring are signs of this manifestation. Gold for kingship, frankincense for divinity, myrrh a sign of the death he will go on to die for our salvation.

The visit of the magi is so familiar to us in the Christmas story - in our nativity plays and on our Christmas cards - that we can miss some of the details we find in the Gospel account. We don't know how many magi there were or whether they were only wise *men*. In our mind's eye three wise men go straight to Herod to see the newborn King, but in our Gospel it is the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem and their enquiries about where this King is to be born that alerts Herod and alarms the whole of Jerusalem. When we come to the text of the Bible, we find our familiar story made strange.

The coming of the Magi is also a story of coming to encounter Christ, only to find a familiar story made

strange. The magi come to meet Christ expecting to encounter a newborn King in a great capital city, a figure of worldly power. Instead, their notions of kingship and worldly power are transformed. They find no king in a city of power, but the saviour of the world in a small forgotten town. 'They left for their own country by another road'. At one level this practical - they are trying to avoid alerting Herod to Christ's whereabouts. There is a deeper meaning here too. 'They left for their own country by another road'. They are transformed by their encounter with Christ and can no longer travel their old road of their lives to this point.

The poet TS Eliot describes this encounter in his poem 'The Journey of the Magi'. He captures perfectly how the magis' expectations of what Kingly power might look like - of who Christ is - are quietly frustrated: 'Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.'

Eliot captures too how the familiar notions of kingship are made strange as he recounts the questioning of one of the Magi of what precisely had been made manifest to them in this encounter, 'This: 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'. The familiar made strange.

Eliot alludes to the encounter all of us are required to have with Christ, the encounter which made the familiar ways of being strange to the magi, the encounter which turns our ways of thinking and being and doing upside down: 'We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation'. Returning home by a different route.

Encountering Christ transforms our expectations, makes strange our familiar ways of being nurtured by the world outside, leaves us uneasy with going along with received

wisdom, takes us to new and unexpected places. Encountering Christ makes manifest to us who Christ really is: the Word made flesh whose birth we are celebrating, God entered into our world to transform our expectations and to bring us to God self. Today we encounter him in bread and wine just as the magi encountered him as a newborn child. How is he transforming our expectations today? What is familiar that he is making strange? How is he calling us to return home transformed? How is he calling us to return to our everyday lives via a different route?

The Journey of the Magi - T S Eliot

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;

With a running stream and a water-mill beating the
darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: 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.
I should be glad of another death.