

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Epiphany - 8th January 2023

All Saints' Marseille

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A friend of mine commented the other day how sending Christmas cards is going out of fashion, as we are more apt nowadays to send messages on social media to our thousand 'closest' friends. There is no doubt an ecological dimension to this shift, and a background of increases in the cost of postage. But I must admit I still enjoy receiving Christmas cards, partly as they enable us over a period of weeks to remember in love the people who sent them. Opening and closing a WhatsApp message doesn't seem to have the same effect - but that's probably just because I am middle-aged.

Two of the most popular images on Christmas cards are the Virgin and child and the three kings. When the two come together at the Epiphany (which means 'revelation'), figures representing human power and wealth are seen laying down their gifts before a sight so precious that human power and wealth are lost in wonder. It was only in the second century that the idea of the visitors to the manger being kings emerged, with its echo of Isaiah's prophecy heard in our Old Testament reading this morning. It's interesting how the idea has stuck. I suspect it's partly because there is something compelling about worldly power being shown brought to its knees by a holy infant. The love of power

encountering the power of love. That is as true for our time as it was in the first century.

There is another reflex going on in the paintings too. The incarnation is about God forgoing privilege to be one with us. Found not in wealth and splendour but in poverty and imminent oppression. The visitors respond to that forgoing of privilege by kneeling down themselves. Meeting God on a stable floor. (Ask yourselves how clean that would have been.) As we have seen in previous reflections, life with God is all about call and response.

But the first century visitors weren't actually kings, so far as we know. They were *magoi* (from which we get the word magic) – astrologers, fortune-tellers, representatives of a different belief system. Matthew's account of the Christmas story shows God's new life pulsing through unlikely people, as Herod and the establishment stand around dismissing or fretting – and then murdering, to make sure there is no actual threat to them. The Christmas story shows how strangers are called as unexpected witnesses to God's life-changing action – the poor and marginalized, living outside the walls of respectability, or foreigners like these.

So we mustn't be surprised that that's how the story continues. The Gospel shows Jesus constantly going out to those who were beyond the boundaries of respectability and bringing them in. Showing those around him, then and now, that there are no barriers to God's love. The hostility he encountered came from those whose standing and power were challenged by his message. Herod the Great at his birth, and later Herod Antipas and the might of Rome at his death. But Jesus's message of God's radical, inclusive love proved stronger, and still does.

Our readings today from the prophet Isaiah and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians also reflect on this – how God's vision is far wider and greater than our human assumptions, and how, if we follow Christ, we will always be surprised where it leads us.

What of the gifts the visitors brought? What might they signify for us? Gold points to our economic interests. Security, home, work. For many, a source of worry and anxiety. For others, a sign of indulgence and injustice. Gold is freighted, heavy with meaning. How easy is it for us to lay it down and walk away?

Incense might have been part of the magi's apparatus from which they earned their living. It's also traditionally a sign of prayer, as its smoke rises to heaven. But smoke can also hide things, become a smokescreen behind which we shelter in religiosity while others are suffering. How easy is it to lay aside the props of faith in order to worship the living God who is spirit and truth?

Myrrh is used for embalming. Part of us always wants to keep things as they are, resistant to change. Not allowing the new life of Christ to break in and colour our thoughts and responses. How easy is it for us to lay aside our desire to keep everything as it is? The magi were changed by their encounter, responding to the promptings of God as they left for home by another road.

These are the sort of questions the gifts of the magi ask us. What are we willing to offer God in this new year? What are we willing to lay down before Christ?

Perhaps in the end the compelling thing about these mysterious visitors is their willingness to journey into the unknown. It's good to ask ourselves at the start of a new year where we are willing to be led in response to God's call. The magi were willing to travel far, way outside their comfort zone. We must be prepared

to do the same as we follow where Christ leads. How far are we prepared to go to meet him? And what will we offer when we get there – materially, emotionally, spiritually? There will be joy, wonder and praise, but there will also be sacrifice, fear and uncertainty. Yet in the end there will be salvation – fullness of life, healing from hurt - for all people, in all places and for all time. It's a radical agenda, and in our baptism we made it our own. That's an exciting prospect for a new year, if sometimes a daunting one.

Matthew's gospel, extracts from which are set for many of our Sunday readings this year, begins and ends with a wide and inclusive vision, disturbing to those who would limit faith experience to those who conform to a specific set of beliefs or rules. His gospel begins with a genealogy that speaks of how outsiders have always been included in the history of salvation. It continues with outsiders arriving at the stable and being welcomed in. It insists that no one is outside the scope of God's loving purposes, and at the end the apostles are sent out by the risen Christ with words which resonate across space and time: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

There are times when that does feel daunting. But the Spirit of God is always there to guide us, so that although we may find ourselves having to take a road we might not have expected or even wished to travel, we may trust that it will lead us home. For it is in God, revealed in Christ, that our true home lies, the end of all our desiring. Our Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

The fifth century philosopher Boethius wrote this prayer, with which I will end:

O Father, give the spirit power to climb
To the fountain of all light, and be purified.
Break through the mists of earth, the weight of the clod,
Shine forth in splendour, thou that art calm weather,

And quiet resting place for faithful souls.
To see thee is the end and the beginning,
Thou carriest us, and thou dost go before,
Thou art the journey, and the journey's end.

Amen.