

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Epiphany Sunday – 2nd January 2022

The Reverend Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

The Epiphany is “a feast worthy of most devout celebration”, exclaimed Augustine of Hippo in 412. At that time, it was still a “young” festival in liturgical calendar of the Church, introduced only a few decades before, to celebrate the manifestation, or showing forth, of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word of God made flesh.

Just as the showing forth of the glory of God in Christ takes many different forms, so, across the world this week, Christians from different traditions will commemorate many different events.

While Western churches remember the coming of the Magi, wise men from the East, to worship at the cradle of the Infant Christ, at the same time, in the East, will be celebrated Christ’s birth in Armenian and Russian churches, and Christ’s Baptism in Greek and Romanian churches. We shouldn’t forget Christ’s first recorded miracle, the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana, or the conversion of St Paul following the Epiphany he experiences on the road to Damascus, which the Church celebrates on 25th January. The season ends with the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas): the Christ child who had been manifested to the shepherds and to the wise men at his birth is now recognised by Simeon and Anna.

A great diversity of commemorations, yet all tied together by one common theme: the shining forth, the "Epiphany" of the divine glory of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, the Eternal Word of God, made flesh. Thus, these many commemorations of Epiphany make up a continuing meditation upon the meaning of Christmas - the mystery of God with us, God in our flesh, God manifest in human life, restoring and transforming it by the grace and truth he brings.

The journey of the Magi, as told in the Gospel of Matthew, has fascinated people for two millennia and has been subject to more legendary additions and traditions than any other part of the Nativity story. Over the centuries, the wise men have become Kings, and their supposed remains rest now in a golden shrine in the cathedral of Cologne, in Germany. For many centuries, believers have come from all over Europe to venerate the relics in the shrine, praying for faith, strength and trust to follow the path of the Kings.

The Magi have become part of the popular culture. Many of us give and receive Christmas cards depicting vaguely oriental dignitaries either following a star on camelback, or beside Christ's manger, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

In secular France, bakeries have on display the traditional Kings' Cake all throughout the month of January, and countless are the occasions to indulge in the ritual associated to it - finding the charm and / or the bean hidden in the cake and so getting to wear a crown.

In Central Europe, on Epiphany Day, star singers, carrying a star on a rod and sometimes dressed up colourfully as the wise men and their retinue, walk from house to house and sing. They sometimes offer a blessing of the home, inscribed with chalk on the top of the door frame: C-M-B. The three letters are an acronym for a Latin blessing, *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, "May Christ bless this house.", and, at the same time, they are the initials of the traditional names of the Magi, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

Whichever event it commemorates, the Epiphany is a colourful festival. It is a season for offering hospitality, just as the Holy Family did, when the Magi appeared unexpectedly at their door. It is a season of seeking, journeying, wondering and offering one's gifts.

The Gospel passages read during the Epiphany season recount personal Epiphanies: even if they open to the mystery of Christ's divinity, they are meaningful for the lives of those who are the recipients of these revelations: the shepherds, the wise men, John the Baptist, Saint Paul, the wedding guests at Cana, Simeon and Anna.

I think we often fail to recognise the Epiphanies in our lives. They so often begin in an absence, in a deep longing and desire. And we, so often, deny the absence or cover it up. If we only dared to name the absence – then we could “observe the star at its rising” and, perhaps, set out on a journey.

What deep yearning led the wise men to travel so far, accepting unforeseen obstacles?

In a beautiful sermon in verse, originally accompanied by music, which Romanos the Melodist, a deacon, poet and hymn writer in the sixth century wrote for the Nativity of Christ, we hear a conversation between Mary and Jesus when the Magi came to their door in Bethlehem:

*[Mary] bowed low
and worshipped the offspring of her womb and with tears,
she said, “Great, my Child,
great is all that you have done for me in my poverty;
for see, Magi are outside seeking you.
The kings of the East
seek your face,
and the rich among your people beg to see you,
for truly your people are those
to whom you have been made known as
a little Child, God before the ages.”*

*Jesus the Christ and truly our God
secretly touched his mother’s mind
saying, “Bring in those I have brought by my word,
for it is my word which shone on those who were seeking me.
To the senses it is a star,
but to the mind a power.” – Kontakion of the Nativity*

The star the wise men followed was the word of Christ, Romanos says. They never travelled alone. All along, Christ was with them, calling them to his house. His word, his presence, appeared to their hearts as a longing and desire.

We are ourselves on this journey which the Magi have undertaken long before us. A journey that has started with a deep yearning – for truth or for beauty or for justice or for peace or for healing or for love or for fellowship ... a yearning so deep, so burning, that it awakened in us a sense that our lives were not complete and that there is nothing for it but to follow the star. Whatever we might name as our longing, that is the beginning of our epiphany. It is not emptiness. It is a guiding star that can illumine our life. It is a beacon beckoning us home.

It is God's calling to set out on a long and convoluted journey of seeking him in the most unlikely places, a journey of unexpected challenges and unexpected joys.

Our world is not bereft of God's presence. God leaves hints and signs, a trail to be discovered by those who seek to pursue the holy in the midst of life. Christ allows himself to be found by those who seek him.

Having come to Jesus after a long journey, the Magi bring gifts. The journey of life should end in freely giving, without expecting anything in return – this is a sure sign that one has found Christ.

We too, when we find ourselves in the presence of God - a presence hidden in the goodness of the world He has created, and in the suffering of this world too - we should lay our burden low at his feet, remove our crowns of self-sufficiency, open our treasure chests and offer gifts, and ask God to transform these gifts, to transform our lives, to help us become all he made us to be, to make us anew in Christ.

God has created us for a life journey towards him. Through joy, sorrow and hardship, each one of us goes their way. May we have faith, strength and trust to follow the path the Magi have taken; to follow the star and let it take us to the place where Christ dwells; to stand at the door with the wise men, and listen to the child tell his mother, "Bring them in. I brought them here by my Word."

Amen.