

The Feast of the Epiphany (transferred)

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdelene,
Hewelsfield, 2023.*

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Well, I can keep on wishing you a happy Christmas, because unlike the world, which has already cleared the shelves of Lieberkuchen and replaced it with Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies, mother church keeps on celebrating the birth of Jesus deep into the New Year. And this feast of the Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas (yes, I know it's the 14th day technically, but we need to suspend our disbelief), is one of the most mysterious in the year.

Everything about the gospel reading today is mysterious. Who are these wise men? Various different translations of the Bible call them kings, Magi, philosophers. Where did they come from? Lots of scholars reckon they came from Persia, or somewhere like that, because the Bible tells us that they came from "the East". But then some Bibles translate the words that we heard as "we observed his star at its rising" as, "we observed his star in the east", and so they argue that the wise men must have come from the West if the star was East from where they were. So we don't really know.

They appear from some mysterious place that we don't really know about, and then of course, they simply disappear. I'm always intrigued by people in the Bible who simply disappear. The other obvious one of course is Joseph. By the time we get to

next Sunday, in the gospel reading Jesus will be a man. We don't read any more this year until Jesus is grown-up, and by then St Joseph has simply disappeared. We assume he dies, but we don't know when. We don't know how old Jesus was. He simply drops out of the narrative. And just so with these wise men. They depart, and we hear nothing more about them. At least two places claim to have the tombs of the three Kings, and neither of them has a particularly convincing set of reasons.

Mystery. Who are they? Where do they come from? Where do they go? And what effect did this encounter with Christ have on them?

Well here are two thoughts to hang your reflections on, on this 12th or 14th day of Christmas, on this wonderful feast day.

The first is about journeying. Christians are people on a journey. Pope Francis preached about this on Friday, and he said something I found quite interesting. He suggested that the modern world inclines us to be content where we are. Whereas the gospel asks us to be inquisitive, to be restless, to be full of questions. I think that's quite helpful. The whole nature of the Christian life is that we move slowly towards God. I use this illustration all the time, so forgive me: we are like a cake that has been mixed together and popped in the oven, but we're not done yet. We are still cooking. And so with the wise men, they spot this star, they recognise that something vitally important is happening, and they take this extraordinary journey from wherever it is that they start to Bethlehem, via King Herod of course, and then afterwards their journey continues. But as they journey they are transformed. And so, as we heard in the last line of today's gospel reading, "they returned to their own country by another road." The journey continues, but they don't go back by the familiar path. They take a different road. Away

from Herod of course, changed by their experience, informed by meeting the child. And just so for us. Actually every day we should be aiming to journey a little bit deeper into the mystery of our faith. Every day we should be seeking out Christ. Where will we meet him today? In the Scripture? In the sacrament? In another person? In our prayer time? In a chance encounter with beauty, or hope? But that encounter will always open up for us another road to continue down. We should expect to carry on moving down a different route, because that is the nature of faith. Always moving, 'Westward leading, still proceeding, following yonder star', and that star is Christ, twinkling in the manger, twinkling in the darkness, calling us forward, calling us on.

The other thing to note today, on the feast of the Epiphany, is what meeting the child provokes in the wise men. Again, different Bible translations say slightly different things, but they all mean the same thing. "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and adored him." That's what my Bible at home says. "They knelt down and adored him". I had a look at half a dozen other translations and they say things like, they knelt down and worshipped him, or they paid him homage, or they did obeisance to him. All of those translations are pointing at the same thing: the proper response to meeting Christ is to adore him. 'O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord', as we sung at midnight mass.

And here's this really important truth, that actually the only essential thing that a Christian does is adore Christ. The clue is in the name, *Christian*. The purpose of a Christian is to worship Christ. And we can get terribly hung up on other things: are we doing enough outreach, are we doing enough evangelism, are we doing enough teaching, are we maintaining the fabric of our church adequately, are we paying our parish share, are we engaging

in all the new technologies that we keep being told we need to embrace in in order to be relevant. And all of those things are important (some of the more than others in my opinion), and they're all good things to be doing. They aren't, however, our core purpose. Our core purpose is to adore Christ. Our last Bishop, Michael Perham, talked about this a lot. He used to say that if we get our worship right, all the other things will flow from it. But if we try to do all the other things without worshipping properly, we shouldn't be surprised if we fail.

So the call to each of us on this feast of the Epiphany is to adore. And every day to be ready to take the next step on the journey. Where will your praying lead you to? Because it will lead you down another road. Who knows where? Like the Magi, like the wise men, it's a mystery at the moment. But it will lead us on. Be ready for the journey, ask questions, be a bit restless, and keep worship, keep adoration, at the centre.

And that might not sound very revolutionary. It might even sound a bit boring. But it is the heart of what we are about. Evelyn Underhill, the great Anglican mystic of the early 20th-century wrote that we need to remember that it is that simple daily dedication to saying our prayers and taking the next step in the journey that really matters. And she points to the fact that we now won't hear anything about Jesus in our Sunday worship until he is a man. But those 30 or so years of quiet preparation in Nazareth are absolutely vital to who he becomes. She says, "Christ takes 30 years to grow and two and a half to act... The childlike simple prayer of Nazareth was the right preparation for the awful privilege of the Cross. Just so the light of the Spirit is to unfold gently and steadily within us, till at last our final stature, all God designed for us, is attained."

Amen.