

Sermon, Feast of the Epiphany – The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles

Holy Trinity Church, York – 6th January, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 6:22-27, Psalm 8, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:15-21

Hymns: Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, Angels from the realms of glory, Joy to the World, Hail to the Lord's Anointed, As with gladness, men of old, The First Nowell.

It may come as a surprise to Australians, and not least those of us in the Avon Valley who today, probably at most, have been busy avoiding the heat, to learn that today people, in many countries throughout the world, have been either enjoying a public holiday, and/or indulging in various local customs, many associated with the exchange of gifts! Such is the religious and cultural significance of the Epiphany for people living in South America, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Francophone speaking countries, German speaking countries, Greece and Cyprus, India, the Middle East, the Iberian Peninsula, Russia, Sweden, even the United States of America. Let me give some examples: today in Mediterranean countries, including Italy, you may have exchanged Christmas gifts; taking as the model the presentation of gifts by the Wise Men to Jesus. In Northern Europe significant gifts will have been exchanged today, but so too on Christmas Day as well, and there is the custom that smaller gifts will be given on each of the days in between – I am amazed that the marketeers at David Jones, Myer, and Amazon have not “cottoned on” to this possibility for keeping the public’s credit cards busy!

Perhaps today, you removed your Christmas decorations, the twelve days of Christmas are now complete! If you have not done so then the next available Feast Day for such activity comes on 2nd February, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

This Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ takes its significance in naming from the word “Epiphany” which in the Greek means manifestation or appearance. In

its religious understanding this means the revelation of Christ to humanity. The Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord is one of the oldest Christian celebrations; though what is celebrated, and why it is celebrated, have changed over time. It is thought to have been celebrated at least as early as 361 AD. It became a celebration, firstly in Eastern Christendom, where it has always been held on the 6th January. In the Eastern churches of today, Orthodox and Catholic, it is known today as Theophany – the revelation of God to humanity.

In the original celebrations, the Epiphany noted four distinct moments in Jesus' life: the Baptism of our Lord, Christ's first miracle, the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana, the Nativity of Christ, and fourthly, the Visitation of the Wise Men or Magi. Each of these moments represents a revelation of God to humanity. At Christ's Baptism the Holy Spirit descends, and the voice of God the Father is heard declaring that Jesus is his Son. The miracle of the Wedding at Cana reveals Christ's Divinity. At the Nativity, the Angels bear witness to Jesus, the Christ, while the Shepherds, representing the people of Israel, bow down before Him. At the Visitation of the Wise Men, the Magi, Christ's divinity is revealed to the Gentiles, the other nations of the earth. Subsequently in Western Christendom, the celebration of the Nativity was separated out, so to be Christmas, while the other three remained as part of the Epiphany celebrations. The Epiphany came to be the end of Christmastide – thus the notion of the twelve days of Christmas! Therefore, we have a somewhat neat juxtaposition, commencing with Christmas as the revelation of Christ to Israel in his birth, and concluding with the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles at the Epiphany. Over the centuries the Baptism of our Lord and the first miracle were separated away from the Visitation of the Wise Men.

While I hope these insights into the background, and the ongoing significance, of this Feast Day, and not least its centrality to our Orthodox Church sisters and brothers (the second largest grouping in Christianity with 220 million adherents) and the Oriental Christian churches in Eritrea, Syria, Armenia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and parts of India, with over sixty million members, might be helpful; what else might we do well to take away from its observance at this service.

Our New Testament Reading is a ready reminder of the significance there is in the fact that Jesus came not only to be the Messiah to the Jews, but to be the Christ for all people: Verse 6 states “that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Jesus Christ through the Gospel”. These words are written by the man, who as Saul, on his way to Damascus to destroy the “people of the way” converted to following Christ, and went on, now named Paul, to not only embrace the Jewish followers, but to be quite deliberately, the Apostle to the Gentiles. St Paul reminds us that this gift of membership for all is a gift of God’s Grace – a healthy reminder for us to fully recognise, and understand the breadth, depth, and extent of God’s generous Grace. According to St Paul this gift of membership was not a new intention of God, simply that it was made newly known.

In the Gospel passage from St Matthew, we have what for us this Christmastide, is a reading from the other Nativity narrative, where we learn of the wise men from the East bringing gifts (Some good things can come from the East!) with great joy, and as the famous words go “they departed to their own country by another way”. May I ask if anyone of you received gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, as Christmas gifts this year? Aside from their natural value these gifts have great symbolism – gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense as a symbol of deity and worship, while myrrh, an embalming oil, is a symbol of death and mourning. Such symbolism would have been readily understood in ancient and Biblical times, so that for those present and for those hearing the story, there would have been deep forms of revelation.

Therefore, the questions we might ask ourselves as Gentile successors of the wise men, is to what extent do we rejoice in Jesus’ kingship in our lives? Do we recognise his deity in our worship? Do we give thanks for not only Jesus’ consecrated life but his sacrificial death for us? It is good to celebrate the Epiphany, and we do so tonight with great thanksgiving, joy, and the opportunity to sing! Services of Readings and Carols for Epiphany are a great custom of the English Church, and we replicate that slightly in our Eucharistic celebration tonight with six hymns.