

A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist on the Feast of the Epiphany

Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem...

The narrative of the Epiphany is the story of two human communities: on the one hand Jerusalem, with its great pretensions, and on the other hand Bethlehem, with its more modest but life-changing promises. And it is the story of the wise men, who although they come onto the scene following a star themselves become guides between these two communities, pointers towards redemption not for a few but for all humanity.

The wise men come to Jerusalem because they have seen and read a sign. They come to behold glory.

As a church we are called to 'read the signs of the times'; we are called to be alert to the shifting nature of society and culture so that we can fulfil our ministry to proclaim the gospel afresh in this generation. But we are also called, and this is the thing that we forget to our impoverishment, we are also called to behold glory and to be transformed by and through that act of beholding.

For the wise men coming from the East the sign to which they are attentive is the star. It interrupts the face of the sky that they study so intently and eagerly night after night and it summons them to follow it. Notice that when they speak to Herod they don't say 'we have seen *a* star', they say 'we have seen *his* star'. They already know the meaning of the sign; it signifies the presence of 'the child who has been born king of the Jews'. 'Initially the star rivets their gaze on heaven. But on earth, they discover that the glory they seek resides in humility and in weakness

Glory appears in obscurity, in the midst of persecution, even death. God reveals his glory to us and in us and, because of his presence, we perceive the substance of his transcendent kingdom superimposed upon our temporary world.

Matthew's gospel notes that the wise men arrive in Jerusalem at a particular time: 'In the time of King Herod...' King Herod was a great builder, he built the Temple Mount, the Herodium, and Masada, and his winter palace in Jericho. And he built the Temple in Jerusalem which became the scene of Jesus' final encounters during the last weeks of his life when his own journey has taken him from Bethlehem into the heart of Herod's city.

For all the insecurities of being a puppet king Herod is a king of this world; he reigns over the obvious for the sake of advantages and gains that are obvious. The wise men come to Jerusalem because that is the obvious place to go. Despite his pedigree, Herod keeps close to the scribes and even the priests. In fact, Herod and the Jews are so tightly tied that, from Matthew's telling, we would never guess Herod was not himself a Jew.

Why does Matthew want to give us that impression? It is because Matthew wants us to think of Herod as Herod thought of himself, as the king of the Jews. That is why Jesus is a threat. Herod and Israel are to be seen together. At a mundane level, both pursue a common order. Religious and

political motives intermingle in an agenda that prizes the obvious. As Charles Dennison observed of this culture: amiably all scratch one another's backs, all revere excellence in liturgical and exegetical arts, all bow and scrape before legislative protocol and gush over expansionist fantasies. The chief priests and scribes rush to Herod at once condescending as they instruct him in the meaning of scripture and yet at the same time flattered, revelling in the king's need of them.

The wise men follow the star but they are also perhaps guided by the message of Isaiah chapter 60, our first lesson this morning, with its promise to the exiles that Jerusalem will return to prosperity and glory and leave behind the memory of its ruin and desolation. Not only will the exiles return but foreigners will be drawn to Jerusalem again: 'Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.' This vision might be attractive and reassuring to Herod.

But the text of Micah 5.2-4 which the Jewish wise men share with Herod anticipates a different future. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition or achievements, but by attentiveness to the people: by being a shepherd.

The wise men seek to discern and experience the sign of the times, by contrast the appearance of Jesus reveals and exposes the incomprehension of Herod and all of Israel's leaders. The meaning of the Michan prophecy is lost on them. Out of obscurity, namely out of Bethlehem, David's true and greater son, the king of glory rises. The foundation of the Davidic dynasty had been misunderstood, and thus there have developed misconceptions about the intent of the Davidic line and the limits of God's salvation. Glory and obscurity cannot coexist in their eyes.

It is the magi, these foreign visitors, who unveil the mystery to which Paul refers (Ephesians 3.6) and who disclose the nature of God's kingdom announced in Jesus.

The mere thought that there was another "king" out there who could threaten Herod's security was cause enough to disturb him. The fact that the whole of Jerusalem was agitated along with him testifies to the fact that there are very few societies that embrace change. Herod, his wise men, the wise men from the east all seek to discern a sign. Jesus encountered this same urge among his contemporaries. Why does this generation ask for a sign? It is because they are seeking security rather than faith. Why does the Church ask for a sign: success, increased attendance, power, influence?' All along, as Archbishop Trevor Huddleston declared, 'The Sign is the Lord Jesus Himself, the Living Lord...'¹

During the week someone expressed to me the hope that the cathedral would return to its dominant role as leader of the Newcastle community. I wanted to say 'stop it', stop it right now; don't bow down to Herod, don't commit yourself to the obvious, recognise your importance as a revealer of the glory of God.

A common theme in the three lessons appointed for this day is the manifestation of God to people outside the religious community. Isaiah reminds the community not that it is unimportant or without value but that it has a call to be a light to the nations.

The Letter to the Ephesians suggests that the ultimate purpose of God is the unification of humanity in a community where all distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders" have vanished. The Gospel

¹ Piers McGrandle, *Trevor Huddleston: Turbulent Priest*, 2004, p. 142

of Matthew reminds us that such distinctions began to erode with the coming of Christ, who was revealed to some who were thought to be on the outside and paradoxically rejected by many who were thought to be on the inside.

The church's observance of Epiphany is not a triumphal occasion to celebrate our privileged status as those who have seen the light. The lessons appointed for this day encourage humble admission that God's glory may be manifested where we least expect it. Sometimes God's people become light for others (Isa. 60:3; Eph. 3:10); but sometimes they appear blind to the light others can see (Matt. 2:1-6).

One of the central images of God's communication in the scriptures is that of the shining face. From the priestly blessing of Numbers 6 to the continuous references in the psalms, it is expected that worshipers will see the radiance of God's face, and that in its light they too will shine. And the Greek word for this radiance, this shining of the face, is *epifaneia*, or epiphany. As we celebrate this feast of the Epiphany may we experience that radiance today and convey it to this community in the year and years to come.