

Sermon 5th January 2014 'Epiphany moments; God's Fingerprint'

Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Prayer: Guiding God, your light beams into our lives, offering us what we cannot do without: hope. Help us hear your hope, and draw nearer to you and your truth as we encounter your word together today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I have really enjoyed the New Year's statutory holidays this year; in particular I had time to read my current, favourite author. She writes detective murder mysteries and in the latest one in the search for the murderer, the clue she followed led to the revealing of his fingerprints. Our finger prints are a unique revelation of our 'having **been** present', and moved on...

I have approached our scriptures and theme this morning from a perspective that the church season of 'Epiphany' is the revealing of God's fingerprints all over Christmas. God was here, but... But the manger is about to be emptied, the young parents and even younger baby fleeing, the guests and visitors and ... have all been and are now going home... Leaving God's fingerprints all over the place, showing God's fingerprints in the arrival of the light of the world... as John in his Gospel says.

I **have** anticipated a little – in this summation! I had three conversations last week with folk who were wanting to clear up 'Christmas', tidy the church and put all such things away and.... And I had to say: 'we can't – at least not yet'. The baby has to be in the manger for another week. We can't have the **wise-men arriving** to see him and finding an *empty* manger! Of course those of us present last Sunday have had to deal with the fact the scriptures were telling us about Joseph and Mary's flight to Egypt... but for us it is only this week the magi arrive... Vc

And in Church language their arrival begins the season of Epiphany. The secular definition of epiphany is an "a-ha" moment. And, actually, despite the unexpectedness of them, we love these "out-of-nowhere" gifts: sudden clarity about a tough decision, a creative solution to a thorny problem, a revelation about a relationship. It was suggested in my background reading that in fact most often, epiphanies come after long periods of study or research. Time to let the brain – on its own *so to speak* ponder, reflect, mull over... and then the light strikes... cV

In Church language Epiphany is the moment the rest of the world (symbolised by the Wise-men) **see's**, realises, recognises the divine fingerprint on this story and that **God-is-with-us** in Jesus. The light of the world has come as Isaiah predicted. It shines so brightly that even the rest of the intellectual world can see and follow, and then bow in worship before him.

We traditionally have two forms of address for these visitors, they are interchangeable. Wise-men or Magi (and yes Magi is linked with Magic), tradition tells us that **learned people** from the fabled East visited Herod, Joseph and Mary. Remember that Astrology was an esteemed field of expertise and these experts had pinpointed the rising of the star as pointing to the birth of a ruler in Israel.

The wise-men did their research, they did their study and followed it up with a long period of travel – but their epiphany did not come until they were confronted by a baby in a manger. Vs11 'They **saw** the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him."

They gave this child gifts for a king, gifts that echo strongly in the Isaiah passage we heard today, which is why of course the Church has these readings together! In his prophecy Isaiah foresaw a time when "And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD." (Our Psalm set down for today also strongly echoes this.)

The way the church sees the Christmas story unfolding is against Biblical traditions and prophecies and stories like these. We see with the light of that same star God's fingers all over this story, the people, the events, the outcome... and what joy fills us when the gift of an 'a-ha' moment, a flash of

insight, a touch of the spirit holy fills **our lives** and **we know what we see**, and bow down in worship and praise. These wise men **did not** bow to Herod – in the NIV it says they listened to and they 'heard' the king and went on their way... They became filled with joy when the star stopped, they went in and saw the baby; **and now** they bow before the 'King of the Jews'.

Is it ironic that these foreigners, these Gentile world leaders see what Jesus' own cannot? Herod, King Herod in his insanity had a *pretty good suspicion*, but his priests, chief priests, and teachers of the law were blind? Fearful of consequences? Terrified of the potential of truth? Cv

Another reason these passages are so loved by the Church is that they reinforce the truth of God's call to be for the **entire world** to come before him and bow down in praise and worship. When Isaiah was sharing his prophecy it would have been in the late 6th century BCE. It was after they, the exiles had returned from Babylon. In this early post-exilic time they still had high expectations of just what God was **going to do** in the immediate for them, **then and there** and this in our chapter today includes the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple etc . But this prophecy **also includes** what God was going to do in the future, the everlasting future – the "more" that is always in God.

Isaiah **put it**: “**3** Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. **4** "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar,...” Hear the echoes? Matthew certainly did and shared them with us as he told us the Gospel of Jesus. Matthew saw in the coming of the Wise-men, who worshiped, fragments of Isaiah's' prophecy – coming true. He claimed the relevance of Isaiah's prophecy for Jesus and made it part of Jesus story.

The light that showed the Magi how to be filled with joy and discover the 'King' is still working! The batteries or power supply has yet to show signs of failing. However all of us I believe can testify to how darkness encroaches. How darkness that Isaiah speaks about can cast its shadow in our world, communities and our lives. Whenever, wherever we recognise this shadow it becomes a time, a place **we need to remember** hearing about and seeing where God has been at work. God' fingerprints are all over your life, in identifying them, we like Matthew, can claim this story for ourselves.

An offering to take away and cogitate, reflect, think and pray over is that in claiming this story as God at work, and calling the baby 'King of the Jews'; Matthew was pointing us to the ending of this story.

*H Wallace Just as the wise-men did not experience their epiphany until facing the manger, so it is that until we face the cross and **see the sign** on it that says 'King of the Jews'; is the truth of Jesus's kingdom revealed.

Wallace offers for our reflection: “His kingdom is not of the type we might normally expect, one marked by power, strength and authority. It will in the end be marked by a cross, a tool of oppression and injustice meant to indicate failure and rejection. As we read of the crucifixion we are reminded of the wise men's testimony and hope, and we read with new insight.”

The echoes of Isaiah's story are strong here. It pointed to a truth which would shape how the events to follow were understood; it was a truth that helped the people of Judah and Jerusalem face hardship and disappointment. Isaiah's wonderful vision of the light coming, the light which in the end is the Lord himself (v. 20) helped to maintain their hope, and shaped the way they lived their life.

The story of the birth of Jesus the Christ can be seen in and of itself as an end, an end of the waiting of Advent, the coming of the one expected. And it is that, for Jesus is Immanuel, 'God with us', and like the Magi we see, bow and worship. But actually it is also a part of God's 'more'.

It is itself a light that points us toward another end, the fullness of the kingdom of heaven as Matthew calls it and it helps shape how we live our life toward that end. We are part of the 'now' – for we have **seen the fingerprints** of where God has been at work; **and** we are part of the working to the 'kingdom yet to be'. What will you leave your fingerprints on, in its building? Amen.