

Making known the mystery

The trees may be lining the kerbs, the decorations packed away, the last of the leftovers finally thrown out in an admission of defeat, and the presents exchanged for what we really wanted; cards, wrapping paper and what were a few weeks ago expensive essentials are all now reduced and the easter eggs make their appearances on the shelves of the shops. In a world where we struggle to hold anything for a space, Christmas is over, time to move on. Except that in the Church year we are not allowed to rush on quite so quickly. On this feast of the Epiphany, we are brought back to the mystery, we cannot escape the wonder of God with us as we are dragged back with the Magi to gaze upon the child who is both God and human.

Epiphany means revelation, about being astonished – an unexpected moment or experience that makes you see and understand things in a completely new way. What we celebrate today is that deepest mystery – God's revelation to the world in Jesus Christ, born as a humble, vulnerable child in an out of the way place. God with us – with us always, in our ordinary lives, through the miracle of the incarnation.

In Matthew's gospel this revelation is witnessed first, not by the religious or political rulers of the day but by strangers from far away, Gentile Magi who come seeking the new 'King of the Jews'. And when they find him, they worship him. They find him not in a palace, in the expected place, but 'God with us' in the unexpected place.

The Epiphany story is about how God is found not at the centre of power but at the margins, not in the certainty of cultural and religious safety and conformity, but beyond the boundaries where new relationships and discoveries are made, where the elite bow down and kneel before a small child, and where refugees on the move will soon need to flee for their lives.

It is in the last few verses of the Epiphany story that we find the key to holding to this mystery, the key to living in the light and truth and power of the incarnation, of God with us. The magi worshipped Christ, they opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts, then they went home by another road.

They worshipped him – they knelt down and paid him homage

We hear the magi are ‘overwhelmed with joy’ when they reach their destination, the place where Jesus is. They are astonished. Their first response on seeing the child is to fall to their knees and to worship him. They allow the truth of what they see to transform and delight them. These seekers and enquirers on pilgrimage have become worshippers.

In Manger Square in Bethlehem stands the Church of the Nativity, a must see on any pilgrimage. The only entrance though is through a small door, a door that everyone has to stoop to enter. In the Christmas liturgy we hear repeatedly the words, “God who stooped to touch earth.” We celebrate the coming of heaven in the person of Christ to earth. But to fully understand and experience it you and I are required to stoop, to kneel in worship before the one who holds us.

In Matthew’s revelation of the incarnation, of Christ come to be with us, he shows us who he is, and who we are, in his light. Our response can only be to be astonished and amazed and to bow our knee and worship too. Transformed by that encounter and revelation, we cannot help

ourselves from telling others about it, both by our actions and words. As we respond to his light we become witnesses to his revelation too, signposts of his love for others, the star that points his way. That's the promise of Isaiah in our first reading, "arise, shine, for your light has come." That's what Paul keeps telling us in Ephesians, this mystery has been and is being revealed to and through us. Our worship of Christ is necessary if we too are to shine by offering him what we have.

They opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts.

The problem with our traditional telling of this story is that we limit the gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, three gifts. Now they're pretty good gifts, don't get me wrong, Mary won't be queuing at the returns counter of Marks and Spencer for these. But the text actually says, they opened their treasure chests. The Magi give gifts out of their abundance, they have carried treasure with them to offer.

These gifts are given after they have worshipped. Our first response must always be the worship of Christ, the adoration of the mystery that God loves us so much that God becomes one of us, with us for ever.

And out of that worship comes the giving of our gifts, the opening of our treasure chests.

I wonder how many of us see ourselves as treasure chests that hold immense possibility within? How many of us see ourselves as carrying treasure that can bring joy, treasures that can bring healing, treasures that can bring release? When we dragged ourselves out of bed on this cold morning and stood before the mirror, did we see a treasure chest that holds precious and unique gifts? Or do we see ourselves as creaky old boxes, chipped, maybe even empty boxes or boxes that are sealed shut. Because the truth is we are all treasure chests, we all hold precious gifts, we all have something to offer.

Like the Magi we tell of God's love and revelation to us by how we give our gifts. What do you have that only you can share with the world? Be generous in the giving of the gift of yourself. All of us here are precious gifts, gifts to the Church and gifts to the world. This year we need to release more of those gifts, to give out of the treasure we carry in ourselves.

We need to take seriously the need to see our financial giving as a result of our worship, both personally and as a parish, the encounter we have with the incarnate Christ impacts all that we have and all that we offer.

We can worship by making known the mystery of Christ in and through our homes. That's why we have the tradition of marking our homes with chalk. When we bless the chalk later, we will pray, "Bless this chalk that those who see the blessing on our homes may know that our doorways are places of welcome and blessing and that you are the God who blesses us every day." What a statement to make to our neighbours, visitors, family and friends, to our community! Let me encourage you to take up a new tradition!

Because in this way we show the world our love for God by the paths we choose to follow. Allow this Epiphany story to change you so that you also go a different way.

They returned by another road.

Whatever the Magi expected on their long journey, everything changed after their encounter. Nothing can be the same. They go on their return

journey by another road. The Epiphany reminds us that the incarnation changes everything, nothing is ever the same again.

This world may feel the same, politicians struggling to articulate a vision of a common life where the vulnerable and marginalised are placed at the centre, where we don't have to demonise others to feel good about ourselves; where tyrants take control of other nations, there may still be war in Ukraine, executions in Iran, climate conditions that warn us we have little time left to change. But in the light of Christ, we see differently.

When the Magi depart Herod is still on the throne, indeed in a few days he will order the death squads into Bethlehem to kill all boys under 2, according to Matthew; the Holy Family will be refugees on the road to Egypt, fleeing murder and violence. Everything is the same even as everything is changed. This child, this manifestation of God in the ordinariness of life is the light of the world.

That is why in the Epiphany season we normally celebrate the baptism of Christ, reminding ourselves of our baptism, of our call to be light in the

world; we celebrate the turning of the water into wine to remind ourselves that in this small child the abundance of heaven is contained, that scarcity is a lie told to keep us shrivelled up and lacking, when the abundance of God is on offer to us.

And in all of that we are offered transformation, we are offered a different road to travel by.

The Magi worshipped, opened their treasure chests and gave gifts and returned by a different road. As we celebrate this feast today, as we go home and mark our houses or have our homes blessed in the coming weeks, we are offered the same experience as the Magi. We are brought into the presence of the one before whom all will bow the knee and worship and as we do so we are changed; we are encouraged to see ourselves as treasure chests full of potential and possibility in the Holy Spirit, gifts to this parish and this community; and we are invited to go back by another route, to be changed and live out that change.

Arise shine, for your light has come.