

Sunday 8 January 2023

**Holy Trinity (08.00) & St. Margaret's (09.30) – Holy Communion
Epiphany**

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

What strange people God chooses to be witnesses and messengers of his coming. They hardly seem to be the best way to announce to the world that salvation has come. The magi, or three kings, or wise men, whichever you prefer, are an obvious example, but bear with me, we will get to them later.

First, I wonder what you think about the Apostle Paul? As we heard in our reading this morning, Paul explicitly admits that he is in prison when he writes to that church at Ephesus.

So, how is he going to get on with his work as a missionary?

You might imagine that the Ephesians should be forgiven if they were to take him with a pinch of salt. He sits there in chains, and has the nerve to tell them that something is being revealed through him that has never been known before. All the great prophets and men of God who have gone before somehow failed to notice this thing and yet it is clearly central to the whole plan of God. Do those Ephesians snigger behind their hands and say, "If God tells him secrets, how come he didn't know how to avoid being captured by the authorities?"

I think, though, that that may underestimate the Ephesians. I suspect that they had more understanding than that. After all, Paul's letter to them clearly suggests that they have already accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, and are familiar with Paul's writings, even if they had never met him. What was true is that they had received and taken on board the message that God chooses all people to know him and share his mission.

More to the point, many of those Ephesians know that they would not be Christians at all if God had not revealed to Paul that Gentiles too were included in his plan of salvation.

But if the Ephesians are prepared to believe that step, what about the next step?

Paul is saying that, now the Christian church includes all gentiles, as well as the Jews, it can be used to show the world the 'wisdom of God'. Show the world the wisdom of God - at that point, even if those Ephesians didn't actually laugh out loud, maybe some of us might be tempted to do just that.

Perhaps these days we have got rather more used to thinking of the Church as a kind of tolerated, slightly senile old relative. We wouldn't dream of getting rid of it, but we really can't expect much from it.

Paul, in this letter to the Ephesians, on the other hand, thinks of the Church as a major player in the cosmos. He says that before the coming of the Church, the rulers and authorities managed to get control and status for themselves and persuade themselves, and many others, that they, and not God, were in charge of the destiny of the world. Paul, though, is telling the Ephesians, and also us, that we, the Church, are God's secret weapon in the struggle to bring the world to freedom and to worship of the true God.

So, did Paul get to understand all this because he was clever or somehow worthy? On the contrary, we hear that Paul was the 'very least of all the saints' and that, at the beginning, he even persecuted the Church. What made him suitable to be a messenger for God was his knowledge of his own inadequacy and dependence on God. He is a perfect model for us all.

So, what about those three wise men? Was Paul the same as them, or different?

Before Christmas we were shopping for Christmas cards and I saw one that showed the third wise man sitting in an outdoor cafe with a cool drink in front of him, clearly not about to head off to follow a star. He's speaking to the other wise men mounted on their camels. "I don't think I'll come," he says. 'I'm more of an Old Testament man myself'

It's a very old joke but it still makes me smile.

What Matthew shows us, of course, is that the wise men are part of the hinge that holds the Old and New Testaments together. They come from the east, the land of origins, and they bring the wisdom of the ancient world with them, laying their treasure before the young prince who's about to take centre stage and change everything.

Perhaps they started off with other ideas. Perhaps they believed it was their wisdom and astronomical knowledge that allowed only them to chart and follow that star. They certainly believed that the sign they were witnessing was the stuff of kings, which is why they called in on Herod. Whatever previous misconceptions they may have had, like Paul, they recognise Christ when they meet him. In fact, Matthew tells us they were overwhelmed with joy when they finally found Jesus and they offered him the best they had for the family to use.

If you ask me, the point of those gifts is not so much the reference to Jesus' kingship, his divinity and especially to his death, but more to their value as the highest expressions of reverence that they could each offer. They had nothing better.

And there's the challenge for us.

In terms of time, money and effort, do we offer God our very best or merely what we can afford?

Do we bring the first fruits of our life or simply the left overs?

Today, will we let God into the edges of what we do, or the centre?

This is where Paul and the wise men were exactly the same.
None of them held anything back from God.

As it was back then, so it is still the same today.
Wise men still search for a king and bring him the best of their lives.

Amen.