

Arise, Shine!

Matthew 2:1-12

When I chose the sermon title many months ago I had been hoping to be preaching to a full church with a congregation. I had hoped to hear the congregation and choir sing. I had hoped for a child leading the opening prayer. I had hoped for an elder reading the Bible lessons. I had hoped for a huge offering as people returned from their Christmas and New Year break.

But a resurgence in Covid19, and a more virulent strain of the virus has put paid to that.

Nevertheless, on the Sunday after we mark the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus, and His mother and father, the words I chose from another Epiphany passage from Isaiah, "Arise, shine!" need addressing.

It was quite clear that last Monday, with people having New Year resolutions clear in their minds, that there was a return to emailing and phoning and getting things done. It was a bright and busy start to the week. Then the announcement of the second lockdown came, and then the appalling events in Washington DC were televised, and all of a sudden for many the darkness that was beginning to lift a little began to descend again.

If ever there was a time for the light to shine, it is now.

The word 'epiphany' has two meanings. It refers to the time when Jesus was revealed to the world, and in particular to the wise men (who were non-Jewish). But increasingly the word 'epiphany' has been used to refer to any moment of insight, spiritual or not, that opens our eyes and let us see the world around us, the people around us, the news around us in a new way. To have an 'epiphany' means to have clarity, and understanding.

Our country is having a series of epiphanies because of the Covid pandemic. If we didn't know it before, we are seeing how much we took connection and relationship for granted, and freedom of movement, and freedom to choose. We're seeing how fragile the ecosystem of society is, and how vulnerable so many people are in our community.

The events in Washington DC have been an unsettling epiphany for many. How some have taken democracy, and the security that protects it, for granted. How words, calculated or careless, can

incite. Eyes not only in America but across the world have been opened wide by what happened last week and, please God, a new understanding of how we communicate, and how we include, and how we heal the fractures in our world may come to every nation, and every community.

The Epiphany story in Matthew's gospel has much to teach us. It tells us that these wise men had been studying. They knew their history, and they knew the history of a wider world. They hadn't stumbled over this great event because they had been searching and learning and were ready and willing to recognise the sign when it came. Their eyes were prepared to be open, and when they opened, they saw, and they understood. God was at work in the world, God was preparing to make a difference. God was reaching out and bringing light once more.

Next, these wise men didn't simply keep their noses in their books all the time. They looked around them at the world in which they lived. If they hadn't been looking out, and looking up, they might have missed the signs God was sending.

These wise men, they were willing to test what they thought they had learned and seen. They moved, they travelled to find out, whether to be proved wrong, or right.

As they travelled, they were willing to ask for directions along the way, even if that led them to Herod.

Then, having found the confirmation of what they believed, the infant Jesus with His mother, they responded with all the gratitude they could muster. Gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And finally, after seeing the child, and with Him their hopes realised, they remained open to further visions and insight, and took advice to return home by another way and not to Herod.¹

Here is the Epiphany! Here is the meaning of that strange word. People keeping their eyes open, ready to learn, ready to apply their learning to the experience of their lives, ready to look around them, ready to move, and ready to respond. There is a discipline in what these men did, there is commitment. And there is also the willingness to keep on learning, and to keep on responding. Their eyes were consistently open, their minds were consistently open. And dare I say their hearts were consistently open too.

As an example of what people of faith must be, there are few better.

When I have children in the Church, for Sunday worship, or for school services, if there is time at this time of the year, especially now that the decorations are down, I often take them to the Burne-Jones window. On the left hand-side, under the picture of St Matthew, there is a little scene of the Wise Men meeting with Jesus and His mother. They are only mentioned in Matthew's Gospel, which is why they are there. Sunday-by-Sunday, we see them, but we rarely look at them. Bowing before the Saviour, offering their gifts. Worshipping and witnessing, their eyes wide open, seeing the hope of the world and the salvation of the world and the love for the world right there, before their very eyes. The image in the window is there to remind us of this story, and why it matters all these thousands of years later.

"An Epiphany is not something to be hidden. It is something to be shared. In fact, if one is inclined to hide an epiphany, as if it were some private possession to be protected, then there is some question whether it is a genuine epiphany at all."ⁱⁱ

There they are then, in our Church, Sunday by Sunday, not just at Christmas but throughout the year. The wise men remain our model in their eagerness to learn, to look, and to lavish their gifts upon Jesus. They are our model for the need to be persistent in our own worship and generosity and awareness, looking out for intimations of the divine at any moment, and in any place, and at any time.

Because the wise men, in the window of our Church, are always there, they remind us that our worship and our generosity and our awareness must be a continuing part of our lives and our faith. Not a one-off event, but a continuing revelation just as God is continually revealing Himself to us. With God there is always more to learn, and always more to see and to understand. This is why the call to arise and shine remains a consistent one down through the ages of faith, reaching us today, watching online, eyes wide open.

T S Eliot in his poem, 'Journey of the Magi' imagined the thoughts of the wise men back home: "We returned to our places...but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods."

Because their eyes were opened, because our eyes are opened, Jesus does not make life more comfortable; Jesus doesn't help us fit in and succeed. We can no longer be comfortable in a Covid

world where fragility and vulnerability and broken connection make us aware of how we need to work together and share together and relate to those who are around us. We can no longer be comfortable in a world become too accustomed to the great privilege of democracy which brings not only freedom but responsibilities. There are false gods everywhere, and broken, isolated people everywhere, hurting people everywhere, darkness everywhere.

Well then, in this season of Epiphany, open your eyes; understand what God calls you to do and to be; offer your worship and your thanks; and arise, shine! Be light in this darksome world, where light is needed now more than ever before. In your homes, with your loved ones, in your community, and when the time comes to be together again, here in your Church.

Arise, shine! God's light still goes out into our world, because of people like us who continue to make a difference for good, being a blessing, and a gift of light, wherever we go.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ William V Arnold, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 1, pps 212-214

ⁱⁱ Ibid p216