**An Epiphany January 3 2021**

Many years ago I was working for a Christian organisation, I had been with them for a year and it had been a very demanding year. The organisation had relocated, and there had been almost a complete turnover in those who served on the governing body and in the group’s staffing. It was a time of significant upheaval nationally also the organisation was being forced to “re-invent itself” for a whole new era of ministry. It had been decided that I would organise a National Conference as a part of a new impetus. I was sent to New Zealand to observe their conference and to learn from their leaders. I went, ready to take notes and to be thoroughly educated in what I needed to consider for this coming venture. I received some excellent training during the conference, however this paled into insignificance in comparison with what happened to me as a person. My time in New Zealand became a time of encountering God in a new life-changing way. It became an “epiphany” a time of receiving a new depth of perception of what God is like and of experiencing a new reality of the presence of God.

The visit of the Gentile Magi highlights the reality that in Jesus the whole of society would be experiencing the presence of God in this world. Jesus would provoke conflict with governing authorities and religious leaders, he would be seen as a threat to the status quo. At birth he received gifts fit for a king, but his kingship overturned the expectations of the Hebrew people.

Though the Magi would be unlikely to have had any real understanding of what this king would do. Like putting together a jigsaw puzzle with no picture to guide you, they demonstrate a desire to see the full picture whatever it is. They exude curiosity and commitment, and their willingness to receive and respond to the guiding signs which they interpreted, caused them to encounter Jesus.

It reminds us that the yearnings of those who may not know what they seek are found in Jesus.[[1]](#footnote-1) Last week we sang together *‘the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee [Jesus] tonight’.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

We recognise that within all people there is a need for meaning and purpose in life. We are in a quest for authentic human life and community.

During this week the church traditionally celebrates the feast of the Epiphany. Today we are looking at the gospel story that features in this celebration. Epiphany has become a more common word in recent years, featuring in novels, TED talks and even casual conversation. Sometimes it is seen as those aha moments we experience. Websters Dictionary defines epiphany as *“a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, or an intuitive grasp of reality through a simple or striking event; an illuminating discovery, realisation, or disclosure or a revealing scene or moment.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

The church looks at the visit of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus and Jesus first miracle at the wedding in Cana as key passages which highlight the epiphany, they highlight the unique person of Jesus as Immanuel, God with us, God being revealed to humanity in the person of Jesus the Christ. They point to the reality that our world will never be the same again because of Jesus.

The story of the Magi point us to extraordinary signs in the heavens signalling Jesus birth. Debate has raged about what astronomical phenomena this may have been, but Matthew’s point was God was at work, even in the heavens, prompting people to pay attention to what was happening. The route of the Magi is supernaturally directed in both directions. The dreams they experience were an expected form of divine revelation for the Magi and for ancient Israel. [[4]](#footnote-4) *“God’s grace precedes human actions”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

In our age extraordinary signs are usually greeted with scepticism. Yet God remains God. When I was processing my sense of call one of my greatest struggles related to how to describe a moment of personal revelation with both integrity and clarity. It was a special moment of communicating with God, it was precious, sacred, almost too personal to share, but as an integral part of that journey it needed to be shared.

At unexpected moments in our lives we may receive an “epiphany” a new sense of who God is, of what God is saying to us.

One of the old Christmas Carols contained the lines

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;

Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.

In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed

Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

In a world that exalts logic, we struggle with the concept of a God who cannot be contained, and the story of honouring a baby from an obscure family as one who would make a revolutionary impact on this world seems presumptuous at best. However our Christian faith is not merely an intellectual exercise, it is an encounter with the living God, an encounter that often renders words inadequate.

Many religions are a quest to know, to understand, Christianity is based on reception, God revealing God’s self to us, God taking the initiative, it is not driven by human endeavour, it is about receptivity.

In this context the baby in the manger makes sense, it realigns our thinking away from Jesus as a great teacher and ourselves as students, towards God enabling us to see, God walking in our shoes, God giving us insight, God bringing healing, God planting passion in our hearts.

Receiving such gifts from God result naturally in an outpouring of joy, thanksgiving and praise to God. Matthew describes the Magi as *“overwhelmed with joy”* commentators state that it is difficult to identify a word in English that really encompasses the level of their praise and rejoicing. The King James Version states they *“rejoiced with exceeding, great joy”,* colloquially it has been said *“they were thrilled to bits”.*

Our times of worship are opportunities to express some of that exceeding great joy regarding the ways God has revealed God’s self to us.

Let us sing together the first two verses of Lord for the years

1. M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and reflections” in Leander. E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. O Little Town of Bethlehem vs [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. definition from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and reflections” in Leander. E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)