

The Epiphany 2020 (3.01.2021)

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6; Matthew 2: 1 – 12

Today is the Epiphany, sort of – it's actually on Wednesday, 6th January, but we're celebrating it today. It's the day when we begin to work through the significance of the Christmas story that's tugged our heartstrings, and discover what it reveals to us about the nature of the God we meet in the Christ-child. Last Sunday, when we were online only, we revisited the second part of Luke's birth narrative and saw that that carries some of this freight. But today we have a story exclusive to Matthew's Gospel: the story of the Magi; the story of these wise people, travelling from the font of inscrutable ancient wisdom, bearing gifts which are a revelation, an epiphany, which make the light bulb go on and help us say: aha! So that's what this story of Jesus is going to be all about.

And what the Sunday School books tell us about the significance of each present, what they reveal to us

about Jesus is this: gold shows that he's a king, because kings like bling; frankincense shows that he's divine, because it's what you use when you worship; and myrrh shows that he will suffer for us and his body will need to be embalmed with myrrh.

So, as we enter 2021, we need to consider what it means for us for Jesus to be our king, for him to be the object of our worship, and for him to suffer for and with us.

The notion of a king is a bit of a political anachronism. We wouldn't really want a king today, or at least not one that was more than a tourist attraction and provider of tittle tattle for low brow magazines. But we all know what a king is. And, if Jesus is to be our king, that means that he has to be more than the object of our worship. The mantra is: there's more to faith than religion. We only practice our religion in order to be equipped for and commissioned into lives of service. The history of the word Mass is connected to

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the meaning of being sent. The Mass, a celebration of Holy Communion, the Eucharist is something we only attend – one way or another – in order to be sent from. Having Jesus as our King is about how we live our everyday lives; it's about having an everyday faith; not just a Sunday faith, but a faith that's lived out Monday to Saturday. Having Jesus as our King means living our everyday lives with a commitment to peace, and to justice and to using creation's resources sustainably.

And that involves us in making political statements, because kings are political things, right – with a small p even if not with a big P. It needn't involve us in campaigning for a political party. But each time we exercise our purchasing power as consumers, we are making a political statement. Each time we buy coffee and we decide whether or not to buy fair trade; every time we buy a t-shirt or pair of jeans, disregarding whether they're only cheap because they've been made in a sweat shop; each time we decide whether throw

something away or to allow the resources that went into making it be useful for a bit longer; each time we make one of these decisions we are making a political statement. And the statement we make will betray the extent to which we are succeeding or failing to live out our claim that Jesus is our king.

Yesterday a friend of mine posted on Facebook that at the outset of 2020 she had made a resolution not to buy any new clothes in 2020. As she's not really had anywhere to go in 2020, and clothes shops have been shut for much of it anyway, it turned out that was a pretty easy resolution to keep by default. So she's renewed it for 2021 and she's posted about it on Facebook to make herself accountable to it. The reason she's made this resolution is because she's a Christian. As a high-powered, elegant, fashion-conscious business woman she bears witness to Jesus being king by not throwing away perfectly good clothes so she can be seen in something new at every meeting or dinner or event she goes to. And as the worship we

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are experiencing is currently fragmented and diminished – more about that in a minute – it's all the more important that we exercise our faith in these ways, grasping that living a life of faith is about more than worship but needs to have an impact on our everyday lives.

But, everyday faith cannot be nourished and nurtured unless it is rooted in the rich soil of worship. And that has been a challenge for us in 2020 and continues to be so as we enter 2021. We can only be sent out from worship into lives of everyday faith if, in the first place, we have been gathered for worship. Now, it is way above my pay grade to be deciding whether joining worship online counts as gathering. But, believe me, the great and the good on the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission and the Liturgical Commission are exercising themselves over that precise conundrum.

What does worry me is that they're asking the wrong question. It's rather like the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 when the great and the good thought they had to decide whether it was possible to be a Christian without being circumcised and eating only kosher food. And St. Paul said they could pontificate all they like, but if they look out of the window they will see the Holy Spirit filling up uncircumcised people who eat bacon. It seems to me, in a similar way, whilst the great and the good pontificate, the fact is that people *are* gathering to worship online; and the question isn't whether it's allowed: the question is how we identify and articulate the presence of God in ways that utterly confound our experience and expectations of God up until now.

And Jesus is pretty good at confounding our expectations. That's why wise people also bring him myrrh.

Amen.