

Epiphany

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Sunday 6th January 2008, Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

What a RICHNESS we have in the readings and celebration of EPIPHANY this morning.

"Epiphany" is also known as "The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles". The appearing, making plain, showing of the glory; the showing of God to these Gentiles, the Magi or wise men from Persia...

In Isaiah we read:

Arise, shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you...

The psalm is a coronation psalm, expressing all the hopes that come at the start of a new reign.

Hope of fulfilment of prophecies like that of Isaiah:

"Tribute and gifts will flow in from Tarshish and the Isles... from the kings of Sheba and Seba."

Ephesians talks of the boundless riches of Christ (v8) and the mystery, hidden for ages in God who created all things.(v9) a god whose wisdom in all its rich variety (polupoikilos) is to be made known.

and then in Matthew, in the gospel for today, the story of the Magi bringing their tribute of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

These are stories to stimulate IMAGINATION, to build up HOPE and to instil AWE.

We need IMAGINATION before we can act to create anything new.

We need HOPE if we are to have the energy to sustain action.

and then, in the face of the open display of the glory of God there is AWE.

In Isaiah:

The Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

they shall come and bring gold and frankincense.

What did they seek these wise men from the east. from the Persian priestly class... (were they Zoroastrians? it seems very probable)

They came following a star, they came to pay him homage.

Why?

I don't know.

What did they know, these wise men?

They knew their history, geography and astronomy. Something intersected in all of their knowledge that brought them to Jerusalem and to Herod.

What it was, I don't know, but come they did.

"We have observed the star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."

Something struck them with AWE, something filled them with HOPE, inflamed their IMAGINATION and brought them to Jerusalem.

and from there to Bethlehem.

Trudging along the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem...

if they were to do that today, they would come smack bang up against THE WALL....

The wall that snakes across the countryside between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, It has been there a while. The Archbishop of Canterbury had to go through it when he was visiting Bethlehem for Christmas 2006. Would the Magi have the correct papers? can the gifts they are bringing be allowed through? It is a barrier, a huge one, and it is still being constructed...

[pictures available at: <http://www.shipoffools.com/Features/2006/bethlehem/index.html> and from <http://www.pengon.org/wall/publication.html> a document on The Wall: <http://www.pengon.org/wall/report/pengon~11.pdf>]

The Magi were overwhelmed with joy, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down to pay him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh....

It has been 2,000 years has anything changed?

Rachel still weeps for her children.

What has happened to all of that promise? It is a mystery to me...

so I turn to Paul, who talks in Ephesians about mystery.

to me, the mystery of Christmas is that god became flesh;

But this is not what Paul is talking about.

Before I get to the bit that really rocked me last week, please allow me to take you on a little excursion.

Paul does write about God, but he uses a word which is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. He talks about the rich variety of God's wisdom. It is "many sided" (like the facets of a diamond!); brightly coloured, gay... (πολυποικιλος)

what a joyous understanding of the wisdom of God!

It is an extravagant word which fits beautifully into this letter to the Ephesians.

The Archbishop of Canterbury seemed to echo this understanding of God when he was talking about the diversity of the world in his Christmas sermon: "In the rich diversity of the world, the heavens and earth together, God makes an environment in which love and intelligence may grow, until they are capable of receiving the full impact of God's presence."

And he warns us: "the diversity and mysteriousness of the world around is something precious in itself. To reduce this diversity and to try and empty out the mysteriousness is to fail to allow God to speak through the things of creation as he means to."

but what is the mystery that Paul is talking about?

It is about an epiphany, a mystery which has been revealed, or uncovered, or made known....

and to Paul it is exceedingly mysterious! "not made known to humanity in previous generations...

"but now revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit... he says in verse 6 (Ephesians chapter three, verse six): "that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Even these Zoroastrian priests, these Persian Wise men, might be able to see god... might be able to share in the promise... might be able to eat at table with Paul!

Perhaps something *has* changed. The blasphemy is now the walls which are built, the barriers which are raised.

Is it Globalisation that demands that we become more uniform, just supermarket shoppers; more accepting, less diverse?

Hopefully it is instead that we know more about the other as well as ourselves. Inclusion is not mere acceptance.

It requires deep understanding.

For Paul, the inclusion of those who had been excluded was a huge conversion of spirit (you might say a real Damascus Road event!)

Inclusion was, and is, earth shattering.

As a many sided, many faceted diamond shatters light into all its colours!

May our God shatter us all in this way!

Let us pray that Anglican bishops as they gather around the world this year will know this god. That Kenyans, Pakistanis, Palestinians and Israelis and many other divided peoples will also hear this message.

Our God is diverse, rich, inclusive....

May all come and worship....

Amen

A story of a shepherd near Nablus [in Ha'aretz newspaper Jerusalem](#).

πολυποικιλος — from Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. p901 poikilos [various, multicolored], polypoikilos [most varied] poikilos.

1 This word has the sense of "many-colored" but more often of "various," "manifold." 2. Only the sense "various," "of many kinds" occurs in the NT (cf. Mk. 1:34; Heb. 2:4; 2 Tim. 3:6; Jms. 1:2). In 1 Pet. 4:10 the point is that God's grace manifests itself in many different ways, i.e., in the various charisms (cf. Rom. 12:6ff.; 1 Cor. 12).

polypoikilos. This stronger form ("most varied") occurs in Eph. 3:10: God's wisdom has shown itself in Christ with boundless variety or richness.