

Today, while a little early, we mark Epiphany – a day and a season which might enable us to continue to celebrate God's with us. Traditionally much of the universal church marks Christmas and Epiphany for 40 days– from Christmas Eve until the Feast of Candlemas on the 2nd February (the day when the baby Jesus is brought to the temple for the first time). During this time we are invited to keep the crib up, and to continue to use the liturgical colours of white and gold. Epiphany is often referred to as a festival of light – but more importantly it is a time for us to reflect on how we see God in our midst. While I noticed that last year that this is not a season that St Philip's has always kept, I am going to invite us this year to observe it, as we reflect on the themes it offers.

The key theme of this season is how God is manifest to humanity, or how God is shown to each of us and those who are around us. As we mark Epiphany with the placing of the Magi in the crib – Epiphany in a liturgical sense marks that moment when God is revealed to the world through the incarnation of Jesus – and over the coming weeks we take time to think about what this actually means for us in our faith today – as individuals and as a community.

As I was thinking about this during the week I recalled an essay I had to write when I was at teachers college a long long time ago. It was about stages of development. I don't remember all the detail, but I remember we were encouraged to play peek-a-boo with children of different ages. I remember being struck by the fact that for an infant, when you place your hands in front of your face they truly believe you are gone, if they can't see you – you are not there! As we grow and develop however, our brain helps us understand that while I might not be able to see a person's face behind their hands, or even in the next room – we know that they are still there. There was also something else that emerged – there were some who had the courage to reach out and move the hands to see if something was there.

I am not sure why I recalled this memory this week – but I am fascinated that in terms of child development it is a sign of maturity that we learn to distinguish when someone is near us even if we can't see them – but it made us wonder about our faith too. Because so much our understanding of God, and of the manifestation of Jesus, is that we must continually grow our faith in such a way that we nurture the knowledge that God is with us, even when we can't see the face of God in front of us. We also need to nurture our courage – to develop the skill to reach out.

Today, as we place the Magi in the crib, we are invited to remember how we encounter God. What draws us to faith? What allows us to know that God is

there, even when we can't see. What gives us the courage to reach out and grow?

All faith is based at some level on a personal encounter which causes us to want to believe. Even for those of us who may have been coming to church since the cradle will have had some point in our lives when we were conscious that being Christian was not about our culture and family tradition but about how we have experienced God. These experiences will be different for each of us – for some it may have been a transformative and definable moment – for others it may have been a growing awareness of God's presence – for others still it may have been developing a language to express something we feel we have always known. Our experiences of God will be as varied as we are – and yet each of us – by the very fact that we have come to worship in this place today will have encountered God.

The other thought to hold onto at this point is that we don't just have one encounter with God – there may be a particular moment which is a powerful memory for us – but God is shown to us in many ways and at many times in our Christian journey. God may even call us to one task and then another – God may move us in our faith at different times in our Christian journey. Maybe you can take some time in the coming week to recall those times in your life when God has been shown to you or you have been aware of God's call on your life or decisions. As we think of our own experiences we may be assisted to reflect on the experience of others who have also responded to the call of God.

It is one of the reasons that the story of the Magi is so important – the story of the Magi reaches beyond one group or class of people, it even reaches beyond one experience. In Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus there is no crib scene, in a sense no nativity, BUT immediately after the angel appears to Joseph, we hear that Joseph does all that he should and Jesus is born, and then we hear of the arrival of the Magi.

While Christian tradition holds that the Magi were kings, a more precise description might be that the Magi belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science¹. God used scientists, from another region and faith, to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people know that their Messiah had been born.

God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1525

Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God's own people in through visitors from the East.

Why is this important? Well God uses what is necessary to help us encounter the presence of God. That means God will be made known to us in many and every situation, if only we have the mind and the time to notice!

The reason that we can encounter God is that God provides so many opportunities and possibilities. Amidst all the symbolism of the Magi's arrival, and the gifts that are presented, God is made known to us, wherever we are in time and space!

The gift for us of Epiphany is that it reminds us as we enter this New Year to step beyond what we think we might know; to that which we can't see but know is there. To have the courage of the Magi to reach out and follow where the star leads us – so that we may discover the fullness of God.

The truth is we encounter God each day – this is the promise of Christ's incarnation and of the Epiphany. As the church, we need to be encouraging everyone to hear the voice that calls them forth into all they are created to be, and to notice our daily encounters with God.

We also need to remember that Jesus calls the unexpected to carry out the work of the Kingdom of God. The Magi, the Shepherds and even Herod, had not really expected to encounter God – but they did and they each responded to this invitation in their own way. This is what each of us is called to. We are each called to be aware of God in our lives.

As we begin a new year, and plan for the coming months – let us take time to listen for the voice of God – to have the courage to notice how God is present with us each day, even when it is hard of us to see. But as we journey forward – whatever shape that might take, or however long that might be, may we have the courage to follow where God's star might lead us – and notice God with us.

Amen.