

Reflection for Epiphany by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Dear Friends

I hope you all had a good Christmas, or rather one that was as good as it could be given all the circumstances at the moment and I would like to wish you all a happy prosperous and blessed New Year, a New Year in which our country is likely to continue to face unprecedented challenges.

Sadly, many of us, including Sue and I, have not been able to see and hug our family and friends during this Christmas because of the Pandemic. Let's hope and pray that the new vaccines that are now being rolled out, will enable us all to live our lives more normally in the future and in particular, to see and hug our friends and loved ones.

We live in a materialistic and secular world, which in more normal times would have been able to capitalise on Christmas. Indeed, I think we are yet to see the full effects of the Christmas Covid restrictions feed through to the country's economy, especially in the retail sector. This along with a lot of things that have happened as a result of Covid, give us the opportunity us to reflect on our place in God's world and how we misuse and exploit His creation; the materialistic world in which we live in general ignores or even shuns God.

But if the world could only realise that it is missing out on one of the greatest events in human history, a story full of God's love for His people, where He sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, God made man, to live amongst all of us, Jew and Gentile alike, to show us the way to salvation; something which the Jews, who as God's chosen people and full of human failings just like us, had unfortunately failed to do.

For us Christians, and indeed all mankind, the story has not yet finished, indeed it marks a new beginning for us all – God made man has come among us, has taken human flesh, and has revealed Himself to us, for that is what the word Epiphany means; it comes from the Greek word “epiphaneia” which means manifestation. We use it in the context of Christ, God among us, manifesting Himself, revealing, announcing Himself and all that He would bring to the whole world.

But in Matthew's Gospel account, who did God reveal Himself to? Not to the leaders of the Jewish nation, God's chosen people, but to some poor shepherds and, more particularly, wise men from the East, who were not Jews, but Gentiles.

I find Matthew's story fascinating, and when analysed, it has two very important messages, amongst many, for us all, so let's look at it in more detail.

When we look at those to whom Christ revealed himself, we find that they represent quite a cross section of society, with poor shepherds at one extreme, and wise men from the East at the other. We do not know a great deal about these wise men, but it seems likely that they were quite affluent; they were able to undertake a lengthy journey which would undoubtedly have been arduous and required a large entourage - and they brought expensive gifts.

So what do we know about these wise men.

We know them of course as the Magi. We do not know how many of them there were. Matthew is the only Evangelist who makes reference to them and he did not specify how many there were. The assumption seems to have been made that there were three of them, and this is probably based on the fact that they offered three gifts, of gold, frankincense and myrrh, to the baby Jesus.

Matthew tells us that they came from the East, so it is most likely that they were either Persian, Babylonian or Arabian and devoted to astrology, divination and the interpretation of dreams and, significantly, pagans.

To my mind, it is very sobering to reflect on the fact that here were pagans, coming to pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews, whilst His arrival was ignored by his own race and even taken as a threat to the worldly status quo in Judaism, particularly by King Herod.

So, here we have the main message that I believe Matthew's story has for us; with the Magi, we have one of the first signs that Jesus is for Gentiles, pagans included, as well as the Jews. In other words, He is for the whole human race, all people.

It tells us very significantly, of God's care and love in meeting us whoever we are, wherever we are and whatever we may be doing; God is with us and will guide us in all that we do, but only if we are willing to prayerfully listen to Him and reciprocate the true love that He has for us, both towards ourselves and all those with whom we come in contact; in other words, doing our best to follow Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

So let us think for a while about the story Matthew is telling us. Think about what it means for Jesus to be the true King of all of us, and what that really means for us as Christians.

So firstly, the love of Jesus is for all people, no matter who they are and what they have done, and that as Christians we should try to reflect that in all the things we do.

And secondly as Christians we should also try to reflect God's care and love in meeting people whoever they are, wherever they are and whatever they may be doing.

With my thoughts and prayers for you all in this New Year. Amen