

Epiphany Sermon 6.1.18

+ One hundred years ago, the year 1918 was to be full of promise: the end of the bloodiest war in history was close, amongst other things, this was to be the year in which women's suffrage made a great leap forward. At the start of a year we can never tell what the months ahead hold, but the 2018 headlines haven't given much cause for optimism so far: Michael Wolff's deliciously scurrilous but nonetheless troubling new book casts further doubt on the credibility of the most powerful man on earth, the NHS is in crisis, teaching is in crisis, Brexit limps on, the Middle East is in perpetual turmoil - and the media's New Year advice is as ever limited to tips on how to become a superficially new you: Buy a new bed and sleep better, go on holiday and de-stress. Eat less, drink less, exercise more. Predictably at a much more profound level, Pope Francis in his New Year message exhorts us to jettison life's 'useless baggage', recommending we set aside a daily moment of silence to be with God. Francis said this would help us by 'freeing us from being corroded by the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting'. By ditching 'all sorts of useless baggage', we would rediscover what really matters, what is really significant in our lives.

Today, on the Feast of the Epiphany, we're celebrating the hugely significant visit by wise men from the East to the Christ-child. The word Epiphany means 'showing' or 'manifestation' and today's Feast is important because this was the first occasion Christ's divinity became apparent to gentiles. Though no-one can be certain exactly who they were, we do know that the wise men were not Jews, they were not the expected beneficiaries of the birth of the one who was the Messiah. Their presence represented an inclusivity which was to prove deeply troubling to those who expected a traditional Jewish king. The birth of this child was pivotal, marking as it did the start of a confrontation between the kingdom of God in all its apparent frailty, weakness and insignificance, and the mighty power of Rome. This really mattered and it's why, throughout Christendom today is a major celebration, a public holiday. A Spanish friend told me that until very recently gifts were exchanged on the Feast of the Epiphany, rather than Christmas Day, symbolising the gifts presented to the infant Christ by the wise men - gold, frankincense and myrrh.

So today being a holiday in Europe, a Saturday and the start of a New Year, I decided to cheer myself up by having a look for something light hearted for Epiphany. Googling Epiphany got me nowhere, but wise men was more fruitful and predictably given the subject, the results were rather sexist: the message found on a greeting card 'If the wise men had been women, they would have asked for directions and got there on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, cooked a meal and made arrangements for a return visit.' Then slightly subtler: Two women were sitting at the back of a church discussing their faith. One of them said to the other: 'I totally get the Virgin Birth, but *three* wise men ...'

The account of the Epiphany in Matthew's Gospel has been embellished and our understanding of it enhanced by myriad legends and local traditions. One such legend originates from the author Henry van Dyck, who wrote of the fourth wise man who set off a little late and tried to catch the previous three up. (*An adaptation of his story*) He was carrying his own gifts for the Christ-child: a precious emerald, a blood red ruby and a luminous pearl. On his dash to Bethlehem, he was further delayed by the need to tend a sick man, who needed water and food. The fourth wise man hurried on his way as soon as he could. He arrived in Bethlehem and hearing a child crying, he went into the house full of hope and found a baby boy of about the right age, but the young mother who was tending her son told him that Mary and Joseph had fled in the night, rumour had it they'd gone to Egypt. As they spoke they heard screaming, marching soldiers and the visitor went out to look. The bodies of little boys were lying bleeding in the dust and the wise man blocked the door as a soldier with a bloodied

dagger tried to barge in. He held out his beautiful emerald and the soldier stopped. 'Take it', he said, 'and go on your way. There's nothing for you in this house.' The soldier pocketed the jewel and continued to the next house, on his murderous search for the Holy Innocents.

The wise man continued sadly on his quest to find the Holy Family, travelling in hope to Egypt. On the way he saw terrible poverty, illness, slavery and oppression which he couldn't ignore. By selling his beautiful blood red ruby he managed to help many people, but this meant he arrived months after the Holy Family had left Egypt.

Not knowing where to go next, he journeyed on for several decades, until eventually – an old man by now - he arrived in Jerusalem and learnt that he was almost too late, Christ was dying on the cross. They told him that the child Jesus had become a great teacher, he'd healed, he'd performed miracles, he'd brought light to a dark world that wouldn't accept him and now he was being crucified. Crushed, the wise man was standing gazing at his last remaining jewel, the luminous pearl, when a young girl threw herself at him, clutching him and pleading with him in his own language to save her from being raped and sold into slavery. He had no choice, her captors accepted the pearl and let her go so now the wise man had nothing to offer. He made his way to Golgotha, knelt before Christ in the dust and whispered that he had nothing left to bring, his gifts were gone. He heard a voice: *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... Just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matt 25:35...)*

His gifts had been accepted, his precious jewels had been given to Christ, through his acts of kindness to those in need.

We have no idea how many wise men there really were, what they were called, whether they rode camels or horses and where they came from. But we do know from Matthew's Gospel that they travelled to visit the child Jesus, on arrival they were overwhelmed with joy, they paid him homage, they offered him gifts. Then they left. As far as we know they didn't try to convert the Holy Family to their religion, they didn't become Christians, they didn't try to negotiate a return visit to see how this child grew up – in other words, they gave of themselves, with no expectation of anything in return save that which really matters, the privilege of worshipping God. There was no side to them, no desire for notoriety, power, no spin They had jettisoned all sorts of useless baggage, they had spent a few moments in silence with God, and their actions played a part in conveying to the world the greatest news it has ever known. News which has and will continue to eclipse the grim headlines, the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting. The useless baggage.

The birth of our Saviour showed the world how to seek the Kingdom of God, and perhaps the Epiphany message for us this New Year in our ever-troubled world is to seek out the wise men – and women – in our midst who we so desperately need, but to be wary of those who struggle to abandon the baggage of desire for earthly power and privilege. Amen.