

SERMON: 6 January 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Travelling, Recognising and Guiding” (Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12)

Today is Epiphany. Epiphany comes from two Greek words joined together. The verb used in 2:7 to describe the appearance of the star which the magi followed, means to come to light, appear, be manifest; and coupled with the prefix epi-, it means to come to light, appear, be manifest, upon or to someone or something.

I read a commentary on Epiphany written by Noel Mathias, who founded a charity called WEvolution. He wrote that when thinking about the journey of the Magi to worship the Messiah, we would do well to consider these three questions:

1. How far are we willing to travel?
2. Will we recognise the incarnate Christ when we have found Him?
3. Have our efforts guided anyone else to find Christ?

He also said this about the reading from Isaiah:

“Isaiah’s “Lift up your eyes” is a call to participation – everyone, even those on the margins of power, have an equal stake in uncovering the divine in our world. It is an inclusive call not just to the Israelites but to all nations. And the reward is clear: You will be radiant and your hearts will throb with joy and delight at the treasure you have uncovered. In the Old Testament, God’s glory is always associated with God’s presence. The treasure then uncovered is the uncontainable presence in the world around us. God’s presence unites everyone into sons and daughters – a measure of wholeness that God brings to everyone who heeds Gods call”.

It’s certainly a really hope-filled picture that Isaiah paints, of all nations, including rich men on camels bearing gold and incense, all being drawn to the light of the glory of the Lord and as a result of this glory dawning, people will be able to see and will be radiant:

the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn
‘Lift up your eyes and look about you
Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy

There is a sense that we are all travellers on this journey that we call life, and we are all searching for truth in some way or another.

The strange looking wise travellers from the East must have stood out as being different to those who'd lived in Bethlehem all their days. As Gentiles, some would have looked down upon them as idol worshipping sinners destined and not felt any compulsion to welcome them as fellow travellers.

When the reality of Christ sunk in and the early believers were coming to terms with what Jesus' mission had been, they began to realise that Gentiles were fellow heirs, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (as Paul says in Ephesians 3:4).

In that same letter, Paul makes it clear that, in Christ, all people have access to God through faith; and that the mystery of Christ, has been, and is being, uncovered by God's Spirit, present with us now.

I like the idea that God is being uncovered. That there are treasures still to be discovered in God and that both the treasure, and the search for it, will last eternally.

Which reminds us of that quote I shared earlier about how *The treasure ... uncovered is the uncontainable presence in the world around us. God's presence unites everyone into sons and daughters.*

How far are we willing to travel?

Will we recognise the incarnate Christ when we have found Him?

Have our efforts guided anyone else to find Christ?

There will be lots of possible answers to those questions but I wonder if something we might like to consider is the idea that we will probably at some point or other come up against worldly kingdoms that are not consistent with the kingdom of God, and we will need to be prepared to stand against injustice wherever we find it.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod. Herod was fearful of competition and sought to destroy any hint of opposition. He wasn't unlike other world leaders then. Even today, we can see shades of this kind of kingdom and the oppression it brings to poor people.

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Christ power is a new kind of power - of compassion and justice.

Jesus began a different kingdom, the true kingdom, rooted and established in love. And so when Jesus lived he found himself in opposition to the power hungry kingdom of the day. To this extent Jesus could be considered subversive and his followers must also be subversive.

Jesus didn't begin a new religion. I like what Richard Rohr says about that. He says that the idea of Jesus founding a new religion "was probably the furthest thing from Jesus' mind. He was a Jew, through and through. While honouring and emphasising the

essential and core elements of his tradition, he just ignored and even undercut most non-essential religious norms and mandates. This is rarer than you might think and is invariably the character of any true reformer. They know they are merely following the constant thread of Spirit.”

He goes on, “Jesus had the courage and clarity to sort out what was perennial wisdom from what was unreal, passing, merely cultural, or even destructive. John the Baptist described Jesus as a “winnowing fan” that separates the grain from the chaff (see Matthew 3:12). If we don’t winnow, we spend a lot of time protecting “chaff” or non-essentials.”

I agree that, as a church, if we don’t winnow out the chaff we will find it really difficult to guide anyone else to find Christ. Because people are looking for authentic experiences and so anything that gets in the way of that isn’t going to help.

Examples - the Church’s worship of buildings and rituals; our silence in the face of real need; our judgemental attitudes towards those of a different faith, race or sexuality

Jesus embodied the father heart of God. He followed the thread of the Spirit. He focussed on the things that mattered. And he said it all and did it all in love. We can do the same.

So for the last time, lets consider these three questions again.

How far are we willing to travel to discover Christ?

Will we recognise the incarnate Christ when we have found Him - even in unexpected people and places?

Will our efforts guide anyone else to find Christ?