

S.P.A.C.E. for Epiphany

Wednesday 6th January 2021

The Magi visit the Messiah

² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.’

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:1-12 (a lectionary reading for Epiphany)



The Adoration of the Magi, Peter Paul Rubens (1617)

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The visit of the Magi (or wise men) to pay homage to the infant Jesus was always a popular subject for Christian art. Rubens himself painted it many times but for reasons he could never have imagined this particular version must be the most widely seen. Each year at some point in the broadcast of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from the chapel of King's College Cambridge TV cameras will focus on the altar piece, where this painting now has its home.

The painting itself is typical of Rubens's remarkable skill at a time when he was at the height of his powers. Like his contemporaries Rubens reinforces the accepted interpretation of the passage from Matthew's gospel by showing three Magi each bearing a gift, though of course the biblical account makes no mention of the number of people involved, only the number of gifts. And he domesticates the scene for a Flemish audience by depicting a matronly, Flemish version of Mary a teenage, Jewish mother.

This version of Ruben's Adoration started life in a convent in Leuven (Louvain) in present day Belgium. As well as depicting a well-loved biblical story it was a powerful visual reminder of the importance of worship itself. The infant Jesus - the Word made flesh, God made man - is revealed to wise men from the East. Their response is to kneel in humility and adoration. It made a particularly appropriate subject for an altarpiece in a convent for a contemplative order of nuns yet that is not where we see the painting today.

When, in 1780, the Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II decreed the abolition of contemplative monastic orders, the convent at Leuven was dissolved and its contents sold. For nearly two centuries it belonged to the Grosvenor estate but 60 years ago the painting was bought by a property tycoon, who offered it to King's College. It was moved to its present location a few years later, specifically so that it would "look good in television broadcasts" of the Carol Service. This relocation was controversial as repositioning the painting over the altar affected the visual integrity of a beautiful building.

The story of how the painting came to its present location is more than mere background information of interest to art historians. It reflects changing attitudes to worship and to the role of religion in society and it raises questions we ourselves need to consider.

That painting left Leuven because a powerful emperor, a benevolent despot whose views were in tune with the intellectual currents of his age, saw no value in contemplation. He was a well-intentioned but impatient man, anxious to modernise his rambling empire. Although a practicing Roman Catholic his view of life was very utilitarian. He saw little merit in those whose religious calling was not focused on practical activities like nursing or teaching.

We may well feel some sympathy with this viewpoint and consider that the expression of our faith through practical works is of vital importance. But should that be to the exclusion of time spent reflecting, meditating, or praying? It is the dilemma that faced Mary and Martha. We know from Luke 10:38-42 that Jesus gently rebuked the busy and useful Martha while commending her sister Mary, "*who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.*"

The painting's particular location in the King's College chapel was chosen with a television audience in mind. If seeing this picture prompts more people to consider the importance of the sincere and humble worship shown by those ancient eastern sages then that must be a good thing. But what if its purpose is just to embellish an annual television production with a pleasant but superficial religious gloss? Are there any parallels in our lives? Do any of the things we do add little more than a religious gloss to an otherwise secular life?

A closing thought. At Epiphany we celebrate God being revealed **to** us. Will he be revealed **through** us? That is the real challenge as we reflect of Epiphany at the start of this New Year.

For prayer and reflection...

Epiphany used to mark the end of the twelve days of Christmas celebration. As people are (normally) back at work or school before today they have already stopped celebrating so this festival has become rather neglected. Our lectionary reading reminds us of its association with the visit of the Magi but the underlying meaning of the word epiphany is a “manifestation” or a “striking appearance” of God among us.

When Christians first began to celebrate Christmas as a religious festival Epiphany included a number of different elements, all marking the appearance of God among us in human form as Jesus. These different strands all pointed to events which revealed Jesus’ dual nature as both divine and human, including Jesus’ Baptism, in which the divine voice affirms “*This is my beloved Son*”(Matthew 3:16), and the Wedding at Cana, “*the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory*”(John 2:11). The visit of the Magi only came to be included within Epiphany some time later but the three gifts offered to the Christ child add to our understanding of his true nature.

This Epiphany hymn, “Songs of thankfulness and praise” draws all these various strands together:

1 Songs of thankfulness and praise,
Jesus, Lord, to thee we raise;
manifested by the star
to the sages from afar,
branch of royal David’s stem
in thy birth at Bethlehem:
anthems be to thee addressed,
God in flesh made manifest.

2 Manifest at Jordan’s stream,
prophet, priest, and king supreme;
and at Cana wedding guest
in thy Godhead manifest;
manifest in pow’r divine,
changing water into wine;
anthems be to thee addressed,
God in flesh made manifest.

3 Manifest in making whole
weakened body, fainting soul;
manifest in valiant fight,
quelling all the devil’s might;
manifest in gracious will,
ever bringing good from ill:
anthems be to thee addressed,
God in flesh made manifest.

...and prayer

In a moment of silence think of some way in which you have seen God revealed. It could be...
in someone you know,
in a place or a thing of beauty,
in a loving and unselfish act you have seen personally or heard about,
in something you have been reading about in the Bible.

As you recall that person, thing, or incident, give thanks that the God whom we cannot yet see can be revealed, even to us.

Jesus, light of the world.
Shine in our darkness.

Heavenly Father we pray for people who need to have God's loving presence revealed to them in these difficult times:

for those who are ill and for the medical staff caring for them,
for those concerned about the health of people dear to them,
for those who have just spent Christmas alone for the first time,
for those without work or worried about their job security,

Jesus, light of the world,
Shine in our darkness.

Heavenly Father we pray for church leaders, that through their preaching, teaching and example you may be revealed to those whom they serve,

for Justin our Archbishop, Rose our Bishop and Andrew our Archdeacon,
for the leaders of other Christian denominations,
for Pete our Rector, our churchwardens, and all who support the life of the church in this benefice

Jesus, light of the world,
Shine in our darkness.

And this week's prayer from the Diocesan Briefing

Lord of the years,
as we bear your light through thresholds of uncertainty,
Dispel the shadows and give us courage and wisdom.
Release within us your gifts of grace,
And journey with us as we share your light,
Confident in your ever loving presence. Amen.

The next S.P.A.C.E. reflection will be posted on January 20th