

# Epiphany – Manifestation

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James and All Saints' January 8<sup>th</sup> 2017

## Keynote Bible passages: Ephesians 3.1 – 12, Matthew 2.1 -12

Two weeks before Christmas I travelled south to go on a voyage to the Southern Ocean south of NZ. With some time to spare before departing I went to the Southland Museum to see the Sub-Antarctic islands display. At the Museum there was an art exhibition entitled 'Epiphany: one person's journey of faith in a chaotic world. Knowing I was rostered to preach on this day, it was really interesting to view this. The display had an introductory paragraph: 'These pictures represent a gentle depiction of finding God and consequently the hope that comes from such a relationship. Epiphany is figurative of the struggle that individuals face daily to remain forward thinking progressive contributors to society.'

'Epiphany, one person's journey of faith in a chaotic world'. In truth 'epiphany' is every person's journey. Thus it was for the magi being led to visit the young child Jesus, and bringing gifts. It was a chaotic world then and the event following the gospel reading is of the holy family being guided by a dream to travel to Egypt to escape the turmoil. I wonder – do you regard today's living as in a chaotic world? As we go into 2017 there's an uncertainty with the incoming President of the United States. There's inequality in our own country, and the disadvantaged are finding the going really difficult, and we are well aware of concerns for housing people and of child poverty. Unemployment continues to affect numbers and especially young people. Yet in all this we are called as the artist writes towards positive thinking.

1) First though, some comments about the *Festival of the Epiphany*. It is subtitled 'the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.' This was a key issue in the early church. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ found very real acceptance among non-Jews, 'Gentiles'). However some aspects were up for consideration for those non-Jews, including circumcision for males, and the food laws of Jewish customs. It took a powerful dream to change Peter's thinking about treating everyone as equal and not discriminating. Then follows a council at Jerusalem in which these matters were deliberated. The outcome, perhaps a little patronising was nevertheless very significant: 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.' Furthermore the leaders saw that the Holy Spirit also came on the non-Jews. Thus as we today remember those who brought gifts, we are reminded of the gospel being for *all* people.

2) Second, the dictionary of Liturgy and Worship makes an important point about Epiphany, noting its origins in the Greek word – translated 'manifestation', and that this had to do with the revelation of God to the world through Jesus Christ. An early saint, John Chrysostom in 386 preached on the Epiphany as the first of the Christian festivals, commemorating the appearance of God on earth. What these are suggesting is that while the visit of the magi is recognised, Epiphany is that - and more. What more then?

3) *St Paul* in his letter to the *Ephesians* expands the significance with some profound insights having relevance to this observance. He writes of God's grace being given to humanity and of a mystery made known by revelation. I quote: 'in former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is the Gentiles have become fellow heirs,

members of the same body, and sharers in the body of Christ Jesus through the gospel'. (3.5 - 6)

How then do we 'earth' the significance of today? Living in 'this chaotic world', and remaining forward thinking is a challenge. In the latest 'Taonga' the Anglican Missions CEO Robert Kereopa writes: 'Our church needs to radically re-shape its life toward mission'. The changes in worship style at St James for the 10am service are an endeavour to do just this. We need to remember it is not change for change sake. Rather it is to get more like the profound statement of Archbishop William Temple in 1942: 'The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members.' Whilst that may be an overstatement it does have truth, in our seeking to offer worship opportunity to those who are not familiar with what we regard as 'normal. Even our terminology is different. I remember a few years back when in Johnsonville a person obviously unfamiliar with things Anglican on coming to the church, it happened to be a special service, instead of asking for the order of service they asked if they could have a copy of the programme!

What then of the 8am Service as we know it? We are blessed at St James in there being a choice of worship. Not one better than the other but an alternative, this of a more meditative format, an order we are familiar with, and a congregation welcoming all present. We are not alone in this in the Anglican way. I remember a few years back being invited to preach at a Baptist church in New Plymouth, it was the earlier service. The songs were familiar, like 'What a friend we have in Jesus'. At the morning tea following one could hear the band warming up for the service to follow. Louder and louder! Younger people were congregating outside. Here was this church was seeking to share the gospel in a way communicating with friends who brought their friends.

We can be 'missional' in this service also – in offering friendship, a time of quieter praise and worship, receiving from the Lord. There's time here to reflect, time to 'be', time to seek strength for the coming week, and we go 'to love and serve the Lord.' A lecturer at Otago's Knox College lists key factors for the church of today and tomorrow. These include having 'A strong sense of belonging, an outward focus, a clear sense of direction, effective leadership, a lively faith, and inspiring and engaging worship services' I would suggest a tick for each of these for our 8am worship. The only factor missing is 'a younger age profile.'

Concluding, there's an appealing summary in a verse in Acts, 'Through the Holy Spirit the church was strengthened and grew in numbers, as it lived in reverence for the Lord.' (Acts 9. 31) That is my prayer for St James and All Saints'.

In summary – living 'epiphany' in a chaotic world. For some it is more chaotic than others. We need to be sensitive to this. We don't know what there's going to be, yet in our journey of faith we can find God in relationship and allow forward thinking, trusting in the guidance of the Spirit. Our task then is, like the artist, to express Epiphany, you are I by our lives revealing Christ to the world.

