

Our Prayer Book describes the Feast of Epiphany as “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”. An Epiphany hymn by Bishop Christopher Wordsworth focuses on this idea.

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

Think of Epiphany and we think first of the Magi, the Wise Men from the East, who were captured by the appearance of a mysterious star and trusted it to lead them to their heart’s desire. The Magi were outsiders, representatives of the pagan world. The fact that they appear in the Gospel is a sign that this child is not just for Israel, but for all. God is Lord of the whole world.

So if the Magi represent all of us, what can we learn from their response to this manifestation of God?

First of all, their enterprise was costly. Imagine the apparent foolishness of this journey, with its unknown destination, the dangers on the road, and the persistence they needed. Think, for example, what their wives would have had to say about it all! But in the end they had no choice. They couldn’t do anything else. Sometimes life is like that, and we know that we have to say ‘Yes’ to something, however crazy or difficult it appears, because otherwise we won’t be able to live with ourselves. I guess that the Wise Men felt a bit like that about their journey.

In a way this is how discipleship can feel from time to time. God has manifested himself to us, and we can do no other than set out on this journey of faith, however

foolish it may feel, however uncertain or problematic. The nature of Christian faith is not always rational or clear-cut. It often makes us feel at odds with the world around us, and, speaking for myself, the journey is often punctuated with times of real frustration. One of the things that keeps me going is my companions along the way. Like the Magi, we are all accompanied on our journey, and we can draw strength from one another, as well as being able to offer support and encouragement to each other too. We are not alone, but are members one of another on our journey. That's both an encouragement and a responsibility.

After all, our journey is an important one. Both life-giving and life-saving. We are responding to a manifestation, a disclosure. God has revealed his love for us, and this journey of faith is our response to the way that he has reached out to us. At the deepest level, it's not something we have chosen for ourselves. Each of us has been called. We have been enlisted for this pilgrimage, and our commitment to it should reflect this fact. Like the Magi we need to be prepared to persevere through the uncertainties and feelings of foolishness and irrelevance. We have an end in view, a star to follow.

And we come in order to worship. The Magi knelt before the child and his mother and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts were precious, and represented the best that they had to give. They were offering their worship and their adoration. They were bringing themselves.

I want to encourage you this-morning, because you are here. You have come, like the Magi, to offer your gifts, to listen and reflect, to affirm and to pray, to praise and to celebrate. When we worship we are responding to the One who has manifested himself to us, who has revealed himself as Love, and who has set us free from all that threatens to enslave us. And we worship, not just for ourselves, but for that same world that the Magi represented. Whenever we come together in church we are representatives of all those around us who, for whatever reason, have not recognized that God has manifested himself forth for them. That's why worship is so important. It's important that we give God the glory, and it's important that we stand before him on behalf of all those who do not recognize him.

Let's be honest with one another. Our worship sometimes can be boring. It can sometimes be slipshod and casual. Often we forget what we are about, and who our worship is for. Sadly, to our shame, that is all too true. But that's no reason for not continually making the attempt, for joyfully supporting one another as we come together. We are here for God and for our world which of course is his world too. And we are here for one another, and because we are called. So it is incumbent upon us to give our very best. Our worship should be the best we can give. It should represent the way we want to live our lives as a whole. We worship as a sign of what life can be, of what human relationships can be, of what the world can be. We worship in order to respond to God's purpose for us and for humanity. When we worship we are most fully ourselves.

And thankfully, it's not just up to us. The value of our worship does not just depend upon our own efforts. We worship in the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the Spirit our worship here on earth is caught up in the worship of the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. As we worship here we are caught up in the eternal worship of the heavenly host. Never forget that.

Like the Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem, like the Shepherds hurrying to the Crib, and like the Wise Men on their long and winding road to worship the new born King, many people have been travelling this past year. Mary and Joseph are not the only ones who have been homeless and refugees. Today we remember all those thousands who are, as we speak, travelling in uncertainty and hope across Europe to find a new home, a new life. Our world, with its conflicts and confusion, its worries and wrangling, its injustice and oppression, is in dire need of the peace and goodwill that the angels celebrated. In the end, the purpose of our journey and the journey of all Christian people, is to be a sign of the Kingdom of justice, peace and love that Jesus won for us and urged us to pray and work for, that it might become a reality on earth as it already is in heaven. When we worship, that is what we are celebrating. Today we renew our commitment to this hope and this promise, and we renew our resolution to pray and work for its realisation. It has been manifested forth for us and for our world. We look for its coming.

Shadow and shine art Thou,

Dear Lord to me;
Pillar of cloud and fire,
I follow Thee.
What though the way is long,
In Thee my heart is strong –
Thou art my joy, my song
Praise, praise to Thee