

who is he?

a sermon preached on the
feast of the epiphany

7 January 2018

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by dr muriel porter

the lections: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ps 72; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 2: 1-12

Christmas is over for another year for most Australians – but not for everyone.

Not for the Spanish community here in Melbourne, because in Spain, the Feast of Epiphany we celebrate today is an extension of Christmas, Spanish children traditionally receiving their gifts at Epiphany, and not from a jolly old man dressed in red, but rather from the three kings no less! In many Spanish towns and cities, there are street parades of the arrival of the three kings the night before Epiphany. The kings, often riding on horseback, throw sweets to the children, who then go to bed in great excitement, awaiting their gifts in the morning. Here in Melbourne, a similar festival among the Spanish community is happening today.

Most Australians, however, have scarcely heard of Epiphany, unless perhaps they are vaguely aware it corresponds with the 12th day of Christmas, when most Christmas decorations are taken down.

For us here this morning, who know full well we are celebrating Epiphany, the Feast can appear to be just a commemoration of the arrival of the wise men, or kings as they are often called. An interesting and rather grand addition to the nativity scene – the arrival of exotic foreigners from the East bearing lavish gifts – but little more. Traditionally the hymns we Anglicans sing for Epiphany focus on those gifts, using them as a metaphor for the gifts we might bring the Christ child. ‘Gold of obedience and incense of lowliness’, and ‘truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness’ we sing – these are the gifts we are exalted to bring.

But there is so much more to this feast, as Orthodox Christians know. Their name for Epiphany translates in English as the ‘Theophany’, or ‘God shining forth’, ‘divine manifestation’. It is one of the great feasts of the Christian year for the Orthodox, ranking behind only Easter and Pentecost. And their Gospel reading for Epiphany is not the arrival of the wise men at all; the Gospel we have heard today is their reading for Christmas Day!

No, for the Orthodox, the Epiphany Gospel is Jesus’ baptism, which they see as nothing less than a Trinitarian feast: the Son, Jesus, is there but so too is the Father, whose voice is heard from heaven proclaiming Jesus as the Son, the beloved, with whom he is well pleased; and the Holy Spirit is there, in the form of a dove descending from heaven and alighting on Jesus as he comes up out of the water of baptism. We will celebrate the feast of Christ’s baptism next Sunday, not as a separate Bible story, but as a continuation of today’s feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany is a feast that actually continues right through January to its culmination in early February in Candlemas, the presentation of the Christ child in the Temple, where he is recognised as the Messiah by two faithful old people, Simeon and Anna.

So Epiphanytide is a series of epiphanies or theophanies – the showing of God’s presence in a vulnerable child born to humble parents in a stable, in a Galilean peasant baptized in the River Jordan and proclaimed the Son of God, and then in a remarkable, revolutionary ministry to the sick and the poor and the marginalized.

We have so sentimentalized the Christmas story – and in fact the whole Jesus story – that we can easily miss just how revolutionary the story actually is. Father Ken alerted us to the revolution in his sermon two weeks ago, when he described the Virgin Mary as a ‘revolutionary virgin’ in the context of the annunciation – a young woman in a fiercely

patriarchal society where women were completely controlled by their fathers and husbands, given the agency to give her own freewill consent to God's extraordinary invitation to bear the Christ child.

The revolution didn't stop there. Those shepherds in the fields abiding, called to see the baby Jesus by angels no less – a pretty picture on Christmas cards. But shepherds were the riff raff of Jewish society: dirty, disreputable, society outcasts. Yet they were the first – after his parents – to be shown God in this child. Then the wise men whom we honour today. They might have been people of high repute and significant wealth in their homeland, but in Judea, they were Gentiles – outsiders, outside the Jewish covenant with God. And they found an outsider God. As the Collect for today puts it, they found the incarnate God “not among men of power but on a woman's lap”.

These manifestations, and the others that will follow through his life, show Jesus as the embodiment of his mother's revolutionary song about God's kingdom – lifting up the lowly, having mercy on those who fear him, and filling the hungry with good things.

The fundamental question for the shepherds and the wise men, for John the Baptist and those who witness Jesus' baptism, for the fishermen he calls to follow him, those he heals and all those marginalized people he restores is: *who is he? This child, this man?* And not just who is he for all these people who populate the Bible stories, but *who is he* for us, here and now, in 2018?

This is *our* question in Epiphanytide, and we are really fortunate that in our part of the world, Epiphanytide comes in the relaxed, easy style of an Australian January. Few of us I imagine had time to ponder these important questions in Advent, although we might have longed to do so. Life is impossibly hectic in December in our culture, much as we try not to let its busyness ensnare us. But January is another story. The long summer days and quieter pace are an ideal time to ponder who Christ is for us, here and now.

One way to approach the question is to reflect on the epiphanies we have experienced in our own lives. We have all had them, otherwise we wouldn't be here in church, when most Australians are kicking back on the beach or in a hammock somewhere. Our epiphanies almost certainly didn't involve angels and stars and foreigners bearing gifts; they would have been much more low-key, just 'signs' breaking through our humdrum lives that we might scarcely have reflected on. But now is the time. In prayerful solitude this January, think back over your life and relive the times when you experienced the presence of God with you, be it ever so fleeting. And give thanks.

The words of this morning's Great Thanksgiving Prayer remind us that in our epiphanies God does not only reveal the truth of who God is, the God who comes to meet us in incarnation, but also the truth of who we are. And that is the truly exciting revelation that we find it so hard to believe: God became what we are so that we might become what he is. Because who are we? We, and all people, are loved by God – utterly and completely. God actually likes us, and delights in us, not *despite* who we are, but *because* of who we are, warts and all. That is what the incarnation is all about – to recall us to this astonishing truth. This is the liberation, the restoration, that the Jesus event, from manger to resurrection, offers us.

If we can really believe that God loves us and likes us, then we will stop being fearful, angry, bitter, put-upon human beings, and in the words of the religion writer Clare Boyd-Macrae in an *Age* column last Sunday¹, we will instead be “flooded with joy and gratitude and filled with a new energy”. What an epiphany that would be!

Happy Epiphany!

¹ Clare Boyd-Macrae, 'Faith', *The Age*, 31 December 2017