Epiphany

**Sermon preached by Bishop Jo to the Diocese of Guildford for Sun 3rd Jan 2021 marking Epiphany**

[Isaiah 60.1-6](http://almanac.oremus.org/bible.html?show_ref=no&version=nrsvae&passage=Isaiah%252060.1-6)

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
   and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
2 For darkness shall cover the earth,  
   and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
   and his glory will appear over you.  
3 Nations shall come to your light,  
   and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around;  
   they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
   and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.  
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;  
   your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
   the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
   the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
   all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
   and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

[Matthew 2.1-12](http://almanac.oremus.org/bible.html?show_ref=no&version=nrsvae&passage=Matthew%25202.1-12)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
6 “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
   are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
   who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Nativity plays make us think that the wise men arrived just as the shepherds were leaving.

Well, I’m afraid Matthew 2 suggests that the arrival of these visitors from the Middle East happened some time later, not on the night of Jesus’ birth but possibly when he was an infant, even a toddler.  That’s why the slaughter of the innocents is a culling not of babies but of boys aged two and under.

I’ll come back to that. First, if you want to reflect on the pilgrimage of the Magi, I urge you to google that great poem by T.S. Elliot. Today I want to focus on the end of their story, on the verses that link their visit to the Holy Family with their return journey:

*… they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road*.

These words suggest their encounter with Jesus was transformative: we might even see here the first conversion wrought by our Lord. It wasn’t the call to Andrew and Peter. It wasn’t the healing of the demoniac who then offered to follow Jesus. It was the Magi, the Wise Men, these legendary figures from the area we now called Iran/Iraq who, having encountered the child Jesus, couldn’t return on the route by which they’d arrived.

The narrative makes clear it wasn’t their intellect that brought them to Jesus – their intellect took them to Herod’s palace, to the logical place where a king might be born. Nor was it the advice or request of Mary and Joseph which made them change their itinerary for the way home. It was the experience of bowing down and worshipping the child; which then became the catalyst for a dream they shared, and then revised their plans.

It’s that experience of unadulterated wonder: something which, later, is experienced by Andrew and Peter as, illogically, they left their nets to follow someone they didn’t know. And that same experience of wonder that draws the demoniac and so many other people whom Jesus healed - when they were touched by his transformative presence.

What exactly is wonder? I hesitate to offer any definition. In a way, that ruins its essential mystery. Instead let me point to a couple of experiences, ones that will doubtless make you think of others.

One Christmas soon after Sam and I were married I recall our toddler nephews coming to stay. On Christmas morning they were each introduced to a little pile of presents under our tree. One of the boys got so excited at this realisation that he didn’t know where to put himself. I recall him charging down the long corridor of our flat and then, when he got to the end, not knowing which way to turn – he did a double take (Wacky Races style). His joy was founded on the fact that an anonymous donor had delivered some things for *him* – with his name on them! – under *our* tree, 200 miles from home. How could that be?! The sheer wonder that someone he did not know could be so abundantly generous. (Never mind what was inside – he wasn’t so bothered to unwrap them!) Here’s a situation that’s not knowledge, not intelligence, not sentiment but sheer wonder.

Again, I recall a wonderful outdoor nativity play we used to enact each year with the congregation at Duke Chapel when we lived in North Carolina. Someone shared their country farm– a field, a barn, some bales of hay and a few animals – where family, friends and relations put on their wellie boots and costumes to act it out. I’m guessing our son was maybe four: he didn’t have a role but was pulling at me, desperate to get involved and join the throng. It was informal so eventually I let him go – I’m not sure I could’ve contained him in the audience without a big scene anyway. In his imagination he was there: totally caught up in the story, joining those paying homage around the manger. Someone snapped a picture of him in his anorak looking completely incongruous amidst everyone else in their tea-towels – the visit of the health and safety inspector, someone suggested! – yet open-mouthed in awe and excitement. Totally caught up in the wonder… not knowledge, not intelligence, not sentiment but sheer wonder that God might come to earth and perhaps look a bit like his baby sister.

I dare to think this is the kind of transforming experience which the wise men had, for whom their intelligence and even their own generosity paled into insignificance in the face of the generosity of a God they did not know who took the risk … the risk of becoming human out of nothing else but selfless love. Even now, though the Christmas season is nearly over, it’s not too late, for us to wonder again at God’s generosity….and to allow that experience to convert, to transform, to change us.

Now, if the story of the wise men ended there, we could all sleep comfortably every night. Our wonder might never end.

But, sadly, their decision to go home by another route caused unintended consequences. Herod, realising he’s been duped by them not returning to give information about the birthplace of the child, is threatened by a rival, and seeks to eradicate the child who might challenge his power and supplant him. Never mind the collateral damage.

And so we come to the bloody slaughter of boys under the age of two. We don’t preach on this part of the story very much. It spoils the fairy lights. Perhaps we want to preserve the ‘happy family’ of the nativity. Perhaps the slaughter of people to satisfy a dominant power is too close to home, all too contemporary? We may look across the Atlantic to federal death row in the US, or to boys gunned and missing from a secondary school in Nigeria, or to teenage girls in Pakistan forced to convert and marry at peril of their lives… and that’s before we recognise the sex trade under our noses in our own green and pleasant land. The innocence of childhood meets the abuse of power – in Jesus’ life, in our own communities and right across our world. And the younger it happens, the greater the scarring. Let’s get real about this. Jesus is not immune from these dangers in his own experience; and nor is he distant or unaware today. The need for safeguarding was and is and ever shall be, in this world, very great. Exactly in the place of wonder, we have to guard safe space and protect the vulnerable. Exactly at that place of danger, Jesus is our hope: a hope which is the more real for the way as a tiny baby he brings authentic power to its knees. And for the way his own tender life is threatened.

During the past year, especially during the months of lockdown, the incidence of domestic abuse in this country has soared. Women seeking sanctuary from dangers at home yet unable to get away; children vulnerable, lacking for basic protection and provision which in more normal times are mitigated through school and community programmes. If austerity was a problem in our country before Covid-19, let’s be clear about the pandemic that we must expect to follow, because low incomes are getting lower and the cost of living is rising, jobs are evaporating and state benefits will not stretch, not now and likely worse post-Brexit. Meanwhile in other parts of the country we are raising children with such a surfeit of pampering and privilege that they have little chance *not* to grow into narcissistic adults.

It is tragic. On the one hand we find the worship of Mammon and on the other hand, on an altar Austerity we find the well-being of the poor at risk of sacrifice.

In the story of Jesus we find the innocence of childhood meeting the abuse of power, and transforming it. Both the power of Mammon, on the one hand, and the power of Austerity on the other. His very vulnerability is vital: this is the manner in which our God is made incarnate – unwrapped, undone. It’s the divine vulnerability that initiates transformation… and brings us all to wonder like a child, to be open-mouthed at the crib, to be transformed.

We pray, Lord God, your divine vulnerability may transform the exercise of human power, may bring each of us to our knees, may draw out our treasure for the sake of the poor, may hold us in wonder at the mystery of the Word made flesh.

To the One whose power at work among us can do infinitely more than all we ask or imagine. To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.  Amen.