

*'Lift up your eyes and look around!'*

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

As much as I love Christmas - and I genuinely love Christmas - I am also aware of the risk it carries of reducing the heart of the Gospel to little more than nice emotion and sentiment. While Christmas brings profound hope and deep joy with the unconditional love and invitation of God, sometimes the life-defining potential of this can be lost, especially as we end up looking down to sweep up the needles and the glitter.

Over the last few weeks we have, in this parish, been a centre of worship and storytelling. Hundreds of people have walked through the church doors and been part of the Christmas story through Christingles, candlelit carols, Holy Communion, and the creation of the crib. Thanks be to God.

All sorts of people have been invited to open their hearts and receive the invitation of Christ. And oh, how we pray that something heard or felt, in here, will have spoken to a need or a longing, out there. But, we also know that as the Christmas trees, the cards, and the decorations are being packed away, the risk of that invitation also being boxed up is very great.

But, as if to put this right, along comes the Feast of the Epiphany. It's symbolic that we keep the crib out for this season. Stripped of tinsel and lights, there he still is lying in the manger, and our attention is moved away from the glittery to contemplate and respond to the true glory of his reality.

Be not deceived by the Christmas cards you took down this week, especially the ones, with the hills painted in purple, blue, and gold, with silhouettes of men and camels on the horizon; shapes so familiar and comfortable.

Be not distracted by the nativity play, the children dressed in brown and yellow blankets, with gold shoeboxes and homemade crowns that slip awkwardly to the side.

The Feast of the Epiphany cannot be adequately depicted in art or school plays, (however beautiful and endearing they are), because the theology of the Epiphany reaches far beyond things familiar and comfortable. Dare I say it, without the meaning of Epiphany the message of Christmas is incomplete.

Now, I really think that the visitors, commonly known as the Wise Men or the Three Kings, are most accurately known as the Magi as they are described in the earliest text. It's an important distinction because The 'Magi' highlights how very different they were from Jesus' Jewish context and has nothing to do with wisdom or royalty. I personally prefer it because it indicates much about the unconventional strangers from the East – strangers to the traditions of the land they entered, strangers to the political compromises between Palace and Temple, and strangers to the pious practices of faith.

The inclusion of the 'Magi' as the earliest visitors to Christ, makes clear that he was not *just* for those 'in the know', but for the outsiders, the unconventional, the strangers.

This is the good news; if you feel like a stranger in a foreign land - you're welcome here. If you're searching, or lost, or wandering - this is the place for you. If you don't quite fit into convention - please do come in. Christianity is not a place of uniformity or exclusivity, this is a place of radical welcome and warmth.

Unfortunately, the church sometimes loses sight of this, in the way that losing sight of things can often happen to the church.

At college our Vice Principal always used to say to us of ministry '*Don't get in the way*' cautioning us to make sure that our own ideas or ego didn't stand in the way of another person's journey towards Christ. Sound advice for the church as well as the clergy, as many things that are supposed to be shaped by the Gospel do end up '*getting in the way*' by restricting or reducing the radical reach of God's Incarnation for all people. It is easy to become blinkered, by things like the building, or tradition, or even by a narrow biblical lens.

With such blinkers in mind it is interesting to note that the magi and the shepherds, (Christ's first visitors), had a shared expansiveness in their perspective on things.

As the shepherds gazed out into a vast horizon of hills and geography they had an unlimited view with plenty of space for the heavenly host to appear. As the magi gazed upwards into a vast sky of depth and moonlight they had an unlimited view with plenty of space for the star to appear. Neither were looking downwards or through a tunnel, they were attentively un-blinkered, with an open-ness for the new, the surprising, and even the unconventional.

*'Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together'* Isaiah writes *'then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice'*.

There can be little doubt that the hearts of the Magi 'thrilled and rejoiced' as a result of what they encountered, by looking up and around. And then they responded. With the star in their view, they courageously stepped out of their comfort and journeyed into the unknown as strangers, where they were led to Christ. And they fell to the ground in awe, offered what little they had, and then guided by God, they changed path and direction.

Today we mark the event when the word-made-flesh first reached outwards and began drawing others in, and we see that it best succeeded in those whose eyes were lifted up, looking outwards, and ready to welcome something new on the horizon and to respond to it.

The Feast of the Epiphany asks the church to remember that the revelation of Christ reaches far and wide to welcome all - even the unconventional and the unexpected. The Church is urged to think creatively about who else might want or need to be here, and to be very careful not to get in their way with blinkered perspectives. Epiphany asks us all; *who* might the star be leading *here* to newly find Christ?

But, also, Through the example of the magi, the Feast of the Epiphany attempts to jolt Christians out of their comfortable familiarity, encourages them to look newly upwards and outwards, and to be courageous with the new and the strange, to be led onto new paths in new ways. Epiphany asks us all; *where* might the star be leading *us* to newly find Christ?

## **Amen**

*Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you;*

*Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.*

*Image below: **Virginia Wieringa***

Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany 2018  
Preached by Rev'd Arwen Folkes at St Mawes & St Just Churches  
Isaiah 60.1-6 & Matthew 2.1-12

