

Epiphany 3, January 26th, 2025

8.30 Holy Communion in Oakham School Chapel

Nehemiah 8.1-10, Luke 4.14-21

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Today is, according to the lectionary, the third Sunday of Epiphany. Epiphany isn't a word in common usage these days and it has to some extent become an ecclesiastical term. In terms of a dictionary definition, we have

.....a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.....

Modern jargon would probably use the phrase "lightbulb moment" – for which there are even emoji's on your phone. In our readings over the past few weeks, we have seen such moments as the characters in the gospel story come to realise who Jesus is. At the feast that is called THE Epiphany, it is the wise men, the Magi from the east, who find in Jesus the king that they had been looking for – a somewhat shocking story in some ways. The word Magi is of course the root of the word magic, which in general doesn't meet with approval in scripture; and in the story we see those from outside the Jewish context, probably adherents to Zoroastrianism, practitioners of astrology being the subject of an epiphany, a revelation of the nature of the baby Jesus, which would have been more than a little disturbing the Christian-Jewish community for which Matthew was written.

There are other epiphanies too in the early parts of the gospel story. Two weeks ago it was John the Baptist who had his own epiphany when Jesus came to baptism. He was later to relate it in these words recorded in John's gospel.

I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

And last week it was the turn of Jesus's disciples in the run of epiphanies. At the wedding at Cana in Galilee they saw Jesus turn water into wine and something seems to have clicked in their minds and they saw Jesus's glory and believed in him. What triggered this was I think the words of the steward at the feast

'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'

Wine is a common Old Testament symbol for god's provision and approval, and the "good wine", the "well matured wine" is a phrase that is used to describe the provision at the

heavenly banquet in the Messianic age, and I think they realised that Jesus was this promised Messiah, bringing in the new age, at least to some degree.

And in the readings in the early part of the gospel continue we see more revelations as to who Jesus is, more epiphanies as he is revealed. Our reading today actually jumps over the story of the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness, and we will return to this at the start of Lent, which makes absolutely no chronological sense, but such is church tradition. In that reading, Jesus reveals himself to the spiritual forces ranged against him. Then in today's reading, we see Jesus coming back to his home town of Nazareth and in some sense revealing his true self to his friends and neighbours. He reads words from the prophet Isaiah that again speak of the coming of God's kingdom, with its power to heal and to restore

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Then he adds the startling words

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing

A claim surely that he was the one to bring this about, a claim again to be the Messiah. And there the reading stops, but it really, really shouldn't as the most important bit follows. Whilst many in the congregation were approving of him, others began to mutter

'Is not this Joseph's son?

He really shouldn't be making these claims – he is just a local lad, the son of the carpenter. But Jesus went in to shock them further, referring to two Old Testament stories whose main protagonists were not Jews and were thus, as was thought outside of god's concern.

Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.

God at work, outside the people of Israel. At this, something seems to have clicked in those who heard him – that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, but also that God's kingdom was not just for those in Judea and Israel but was much wider. And this epiphany led to hostility and conflict, and they took Jesus out to throw him off the brow of the hill, but he was somehow able to evade them. This reaction was I think caused by a number of overlapping feelings. Firstly, they couldn't accept someone they had known for many years, making such claims. Secondly the claims he was making were a real threat to the religious establishment and to the concept of Israel as uniquely loved by God to the exclusion of others. And thirdly, on a purely secular level, Nazareth was close to Sephoris, Herod's newly built city, and many in his congregation would have depended on that place for their livelihood. The last thing they wanted was a religious Zealot disturbing their peace and security.

In all these epiphanies, all these revealings of the nature of Jesus, we see that they lead to strong reactions, strong emotions. For the Magi, their epiphany came in the middle of a long arduous journey that they felt it necessary to embark on. For John the Baptist, it led to the triumphant shout to those coming to baptism

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

For the disciples in Cana, their epiphany led to a decision to follow Jesus wherever he led them. In the desert revealing, Satan tried hard to divert Jesus from his ordained path, and in Nazareth, the epiphany of the congregation led to violence and conflict. All very strong reactions.

And what feelings do they evoke in us this morning. I suspect the last thing that draws you to church at 8.30 on a Sunday morning is the need for excitement and enthusiasm, and all you want is a bit of peace and quiet. No ranting preacher and so on. But yet the gospel is something that, at least in our gentle Anglican way, we need to shout about and get excited about, because, to go back to our gospel, it tells us that Jesus

.....brings good news to the poor. That he was sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

He made those words a reality in his lifetime, and he still continues to make them a reality in the lives of his followers. We can come to him, in the poverty of our spirits, to be given a point to our lives; in our captivity to sin and the events that rule our lives and find freedom; in our spiritual blindness, with our physical afflictions and find healing and release. Perhaps all that is something to get just a little bit excited about!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen