

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – The Epiphany

Zoom Service

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On these short winter days, at the darkest time of the year, we often crave the light, and if you think about many of the artistic depictions of the wise men, so often we're shown a night-time scene. The star shines from a midnight-blue sky as below, light beams forth from the crib. The glorious revelation takes place in darkness. This surprising baby comes into a dark world. The gospel reading ends with a reminder of that world: *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. A massacre of innocents will soon take place.*

The gifts that the Magi bring are, as Isaiah had prophesied, *gold* fit to crown a king and *frankincense*, whose perfume, as the carol puts it, *owns a deity nigh*: expensive gifts brought by wise men from distant lands. Wise because they recognise the significance of the star, because they see in the child such promise that it fills them with joy and they feel compelled to *fall down before him*. But they come with a third gift, equally costly – the precious perfume, myrrh, one of the ingredients of Jewish holy incense and anointing oil. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus would bring it to bind Jesus's body before he was laid in the tomb. Already, in the moment that Jesus is recognised as the light of the world, his death is foreshadowed.

We're especially and painfully aware at the moment of oppression and violence. Every day we see the massacre of innocents on our TV screens. Who can't be sickened by the depressing footage showing the consequences of war – lives utterly destroyed yet often cynically dismissed as 'collateral damage'. A non-believing friend said to me earlier this week, *'it's very hard to hold out much hope for the year ahead'*.

But that is precisely what we must do. Do we have any reason to believe things have ever been any different throughout human history? When we face the darkness of our humanity, that is when we most need to listen to the words that have come down to us over thousands of years. In dark times the eyes of faith see the light of God even more clearly. Isaiah looks not to his current circumstances, but to the fulfilment of God's promises in God's time. Foretelling the arrival of the Messiah, he knows the joy this will bring: *Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.* He is writing at a time of great suffering for his people, exiled in Babylon. But although their world may be dark, he sees and proclaims hope for humankind.

We may be sickened by the injustices of this world, by poverty, cruelty and indifference, but the psalmist promises that there will be a time when God's King will *deliver the poor that cry out, the needy and those who have no helper. He shall have pity on the weak and poor; he shall preserve the lives of the needy. He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, and dear shall their blood be in his sight.* And this is our faith: in the face of all that we know about our potential for evil, goodness will triumph.

Just before Christmas, I read an article by a professor from the London School of Economics. In the midst of such desperate news from around the world, she had begun to lose hope. But, she wrote: *Hope is the opposite of nihilism. Paradoxically, the worse the world goes, the more hopeful you must remain to be able to continue fighting. Being hopeful is not about guaranteeing the right outcome, but preserving the right principle: the principle based on which a moral world makes sense* (Lea Ypi).

Our faith is a resurrection faith. After the Crucifixion, when all hope should, on any reasonable grounds have been lost, and yet..... British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan once famously said, *'Events, my dear boy, events'*. An extraordinary and inexplicable event would soon change everything!

Sometimes, through our words, our prayers and our actions, we're able to effect changes for good, but very often we can't and that's a hard lesson to learn. But our faith tells us that in fact that doesn't matter. We may feel, and sometimes actually be powerless to stop evil things from happening, but, thank God, it is not up to us to *guarantee the right outcome.* We did not create this universe, we did not send prophets to prophesy or a Messiah to be born. We did not engineer the Resurrection. Living at the time of the Black Death, the mystic Julian of Norwich could write, *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all*

manner of thing shall be well. We may walk in darkness but we have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned (Isaiah 9.2). We live and trust in the Lord.

Epiphany is defined as a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization. It comes from Koine Greek - ἐπιφάνεια *epipháneia* – the manifestation of a god to mortal eyes. For Christians it means something more specific: it represents the moment that our Lord was revealed to the Gentiles, all those living beyond the confines of the Jewish world. Our Saviour made known to all humanity. In his letter to the Colossians Paul says he has been given the grace *to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.* This revelation has continued down the generations for thousands of years to all of us who hear and believe. We are *sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel* and as such we, who have been given the grace to experience those *boundless riches*, are called also to be lights in the darkness.

In these dark days, may we pray always to be bearers of light and hope.

Amen.