

BIBLE READING: Matthew 2: 1-12

SERMON

The subtitle in the *Book of Common Prayer* for Epiphany, one of the principal feasts of the Church, is 'The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles'. This emphasises that, from the moment of the Incarnation, the good news of Jesus Christ is for all: Jew and Gentile, the wise and the simple, male and female. Nothing in the Greek text of the gospels indicates that the Magi were all male and even the number three and making them Kings is a much later, non-scriptural tradition.

The date chosen to celebrate this feast goes back to the placing of the feast of the Nativity of Christ in the winter solstice: the north European pre-Christian tradition of celebrating the birth of Sun on 25 December differed from the Mediterranean and eastern tradition of having 6 January as the Solstice. As often happens, the two dates merged into a beginning and an end of the same celebration.

The western church adopted 'the twelve days of Christmas' climaxing on the eve of Epiphany, or 'Twelfth Night'. The implication by the fifth century was that this was the night on which the Magi arrived.

Epiphany remains the chief day of celebrating the Incarnation in Orthodox Churches.

Are we being arrogant to suggest that the Epiphany is for all nations? Are we being patronising, to claim that Christ belongs to the entire world?

Historically speaking, without doubt we have often been arrogant. Without doubt there are still some Christian zealots who today treat other races and religions as lesser breeds, to be cajoled or bullied into submission. Arrogance has not entirely faded away.

But does a belief in Christ as the light of the world have to be bound up with arrogance? Is it inevitable? Not at all! In fact whenever belief in Jesus is linked to arrogance it is no longer the truth of the humble, inclusive Christ.

It is true that we cannot step back from preaching "Christ for the world." Not if we want to remain true to the Gospel that excited those first Christian witnesses. We believe that what God did in Christ has relevance for all people. It was for the world that Christ was born, lived, taught, suffered, died and rose again.

However, he and his message are not for an exclusive, privileged few. Not for a smug elite who are then entitled to patronise or mock the rest as outsiders. Christ's arms are stretched wide to embrace all; male and female, young and old, Asian and Australian, Arab and Jew, Hindu and atheist, sinner and saint. As hymn writer Charles Wesley put it:

*Love, like death, has all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void.
Names and sects and parties fall,
You, O Christ, are all in all."*

The Good News is for sharing.

We cannot experience the liberating grace of God in Christ Jesus and not want others to share it. It is good news. Always good news. It is not our task to ram Christianity down the throat of others; but we cannot but help to want them to have the chance to delight in it.

Again, no one has expressed this better than Charles Wesley:

*O that the world might taste and see
The wonders of his grace.
The arms of love that compass me
would all mankind embrace.*

We are called to be the evangelists, the good news bearers, of Christ.

However, the sharing of the good news is best accomplished in genuine, warm-hearted humility. We need to respect the religious heritage and sensibilities of other people.

We need to respect the sincere agnostic and the dedicated humanist. This means we must be ready to listen as well as to speak. Indeed, God may give them a word to speak to us which we desperately need to hear. Joy and enthusiasm, coupled with humility and respect, characterise those who want the world “to taste and see the wonders of his grace.”

There is a powerful saying of a wonderful Christian, the late. D.T Niles of Sri Lanka who commented:
“A Christian is just one beggar showing other beggars where to find bread.”

The setting of this statement was very significant. This saying came from a person living in a community where Christianity was and is a minor religion; about 6% of the population. Niles had a profound respect for the other major religions around him.

There was no limit to his passion for Christ Jesus, he was a tireless evangelist. But he fulfilled his passionate ministry with a humble awareness of his status as “just another one of those for whom Christ Jesus died.” Such humility is the attitude that we need to bring to Epiphany.

The legend that grew around the Wise Men is valid. It was imaginative folk theology.

People took Matthew’s description of the magi and turned them into three kings - Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, representing the then known world of the East, Europe and Africa. While it is a fantasy it is saying something significant. Jesus the Christ belongs to the world and people from every part of the world, and from every race and class, have found in him the revelation of God.

That is the thrust of Epiphany. It is the revealed glory of God which we celebrate and to which we bear witness in the world. No room for arrogance. Let our witness always be done in genuine humility; a humility based on the fact that we have this good news not by virtuous works, effort, superior wisdom, purer religion, but simply by the free grace of God. We have been given a sublime bonus; by grace we are the privileged people who have exciting news to share.

We are just remarkably fortunate beggars, “showing other beggars where to find bread.”