

Sermon for Epiphany (Sunday 8th January 2017)

Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

I want to begin by telling you about something that happened to me several years ago, just outside the door of this church. If you've heard this story before, bear with me – I don't think I have told it to very many people.

It was during the time when I was treasurer and I used to come here sometimes during the week to pick up the bills and other papers that always seemed to be waiting for me. On one such occasion, as I was leaving and locking the church door, a young man came along the High Road on a bicycle. He stopped, got off, rushed up to me and said, "I want to tell you all about the Muslim faith!"

I can't remember what I said in response, if anything, but he didn't give me time to say much. He went on, "Jesus didn't die on the cross. It was Barabbas!"

He didn't actually tell me anything about the Muslim faith. Instead, he began to try to rubbish Christianity, no doubt assuming, correctly, as it happened, that, as I was coming out of a church, I was a Christian. I can't remember what else he said, but it wasn't much more. Eventually I said something like, "Perhaps if you came along to some of our services you'd begin to discover just how much God loves you." With that, he moved away, got back on his bike and pedalled off. Maybe he thought I was too hard a nut to crack!

One thing you can admire about that young man was his enthusiasm for his faith. How many of us are so excited and enthusiastic about our faith in Jesus that we would go up to a perfect stranger and start to talk about Jesus and what we believe about him – or even think about doing that?

But, although we can admire his enthusiasm, I wouldn't otherwise recommend his approach. Despite his apparent intention to tell me about his faith, what he actually did was try to discredit mine – which is not the way, I think, to encourage someone to listen to you. He was also making the assumption that I was Christian – which was true but, bearing in mind that all sorts of people use our building, was not necessarily going to be so. He was also expecting me to be prepared to listen – which is not something all of us would be willing to do, particularly when it comes as a sudden interruption as we go about our business.

There is probably quite a bit we could learn from that story, good and bad, but why do I tell it today – the day we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany? Traditionally, Epiphany is associated with the visit of the wise men, the Magi, who came to see and worship the baby Jesus. We read that story for our Gospel today. But the wise men came from the East, from another country – they were not Jews like the shepherds or indeed Mary and Joseph and

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Jesus himself. The Epiphany is therefore a time when we celebrate that Jesus came, not just for the Jews, but for the whole world, for people of every race and nation. The word “epiphany” means “revelation” or “manifestation” or “showing”. The Feast of the Epiphany is not just the time when we recall a particular part of the nativity story but a celebration of Jesus being revealed as Son of God not just for the Jews but for the whole world. That theme is echoed in our other readings – in Isaiah we read, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn,”¹ while in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians we read, “Gentiles [that is, non-Jews] have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”²

In fact, the traditions of Epiphany are more complicated than that. The actual Feast Day for Epiphany is 6th January – we often move it to the adjacent Sunday so that we can observe it more easily. But originally, 6th January was the day the Church celebrated the whole of the Nativity – the full story of the birth of Jesus – birth, manger, shepherds, wise men and all – and not only all that but Jesus’ Baptism as well. It still is that in the eastern Orthodox churches. But in the west, the parts have got spread out into a 12-day long (or even longer) celebration, with the birth celebrated on the 25th December, the wise men on 6th January and the Baptism on the Sunday following. If you think about it, if Epiphany was actually on the 6th, today would be that Sunday following – the day to mark Jesus’ Baptism. And his Baptism was also a time when Jesus’ true nature was revealed – we didn’t read that story, but you may remember that Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized and afterwards, the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” At his Baptism Jesus was again revealed for who he was and is – the beloved Son of God.

So today is not only the day we celebrate Epiphany but also the day we can mark Jesus’ Baptism – and both speak of him being revealed – as Son of God, as Saviour (remember that was what the angel said to Joseph) and as being that for everyone, not just for the Jews but for the whole world.

And as a result, Epiphany and the whole of the Epiphany Season that follows for the next few weeks is a time when we think about Jesus being Saviour and Son of God for the whole world – when we think of him being revealed, or made known, as that, for everyone. It’s a time when we think of Jesus being made known – that second part of our Mission Statement, Knowing Jesus, making him known. And that is where my story about the young Muslim man who wanted to make his faith known to me comes in – looking at what he did right and what he did wrong.

Would that we all showed the same enthusiasm for making Jesus known that he showed about his faith! But most of would not, I’m sure, however enthusiastic we were, rush up to a total stranger and start thrusting our beliefs at her or him unasked, nor start by implying that whatever faith she or he held was a load of rubbish. To do that would show a lack of care and respect – even a lack of real love, and love is just what we believe we should show

¹ Isaiah 60:3 NRSV

² Ephesians 3:6 NRSV

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to others. Indeed, if we do rush in and start thrusting our beliefs on others without being asked or at least it being in some way appropriate in the circumstances we may well put people off.

We need to look out for opportunities – perhaps a turn in a conversation which gives us an opening – or, maybe, an occasion when someone actually asks – what do you believe, why do you go to church? The trouble is, such occasions don't happen very often – I guess other people don't often want to talk about religion, possibly because it's either conceived as boring or potentially too challenging.

But, supposing somebody did ask you, "Why do you go to church?" What would you say? Have you ever thought?

What I want to do now is give you all 2 or 3 minutes to actually think what you would say. It may help to think of a particular person who might ask you – or perhaps who has asked you. Perhaps you've thought already – but others might want to spend a bit of time making up their minds. And I want you to write it down if you can. It only needs to be short – a couple of lines, say. Write it down so that you can remember it – and take it home and think about it, maybe to change it later when you've thought some more. You could use a spare space in Open Door or the back of the musings sheet and, if you haven't got a pen, I'm sure one of the stewards can find you one in the box on the shelves. If you're really desperate for a piece of paper there are some sheets here.

And make it your answer – not something you think is the right answer. If you come to church just because you like a little walk on Sunday and it's somewhere to go – well, that's your reason! Be honest! There are no "wrong" answers – because the answer is your answer, not someone else's, not some teacher's or theologian's!

And another thing – remember why you're doing it – someone has asked. No point in just saying "I come to church to worship God," or "I come to church to pray." If someone is really asking they'll then want to ask why you want to worship God or why you want to pray. Tell them something that will really help them from the start. You might just prefer to answer the question, "Why do you want to worship God, or pray?"

And then, after you've had some time to do that, I'll see if there are 2 or 3 brave people who will come up and tell us what they've written – and we'll put it up on the flipchart – not because they are going to be specially right answers but just as examples for us all to think about. But now, think for yourselves. Why do you go to church? And write it down.

(There was time for people to think and write. Several people volunteered to come out and read what they had written. Often these were too long to put in full on the flipchart and a few key words or phrases were chosen instead. What follows on the next page (between the horizontal lines) is a transcript of what appeared on the flipchart.)

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Why do you go to church?

Why do you want to worship God?

Need to come to learn more and be challenged
Makes me feel complete
Looking to the light
Enjoy the hymns
Want to join with others
So many blessings
Shared Christian values with others

Thank you. I'd better tell you my answer, just to be fair. The fact it's printed here doesn't make it more right or important!

I'm discovering how good it is to know Jesus and how much he loves me. Coming to church is one way to get to know him better.

Thank you all very much. Think about what you have written – and pray that you might sometime have a chance to say it!