

Epiphany Evensong 2017 Jesus College Oxford 15th January

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

In nomine...

Epiphany. It takes a back seat to Christmas. It's only Epiphany after Twelfth Night, when the Christmas tree, shedding far too many needles, is finally stripped and removed from our homes. It's Epiphany when the grey cold winter really seems to start, the cheery lights have left our streets and carol singers on Cornmarket have left an empty quiet. It's Epiphany when the cost of Christmas hits us, when the bank accounts seem ever so slightly out of balance - and the Rectory wine rack needs some significant restocking. It's Epiphany when we gather up the gifts we've been given and find homes for them - on bookshelves, in kitchen cupboards, in the wardrobe - or, dare I say it, in a growing bag for the charity shop.

And it's Epiphany when no doubt Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem weren't entirely sure what to do with the gifts the three wise men, or magi, or Kings from the East, had brought for their new baby. Now I could talk about what the three gifts signify, or why this story is only in the Gospel of Matthew, or whether in fact we really think it did happen just as Matthew says... But no. Ask me about that after the service if you want to.

Because I'm going to talk about disbelief.

It takes some adjusting to, I understand - having your first baby. Sudden disbelief that you can now see the face, touch the tiny fingers, that have been hidden within for nine long months. It's a crazy whirlwind of crying, feeding, sleeping, crying, feeding, and *not* sleeping... Disbelief at how life can change so much in just a few hours.

And for Mary... She's been told this is the Son of God she's just given birth to. So she's not just looking into the face of her first child, a miracle of life. She's even looking into the mewling baby-face of God. All this while camping out in a stable. How does she get her head round that?

When she thinks it can't get any crazier, three blokes rock up with fine clothes and extraordinary gifts. They've travelled for miles and miles to see her baby, and treat him like an infant prince. Probably all Mary really wants right now is a bath, a comfortable bed, and a good night's sleep. So they bring her myrrh, frankincense, and gold. Obvs.

It all seems a bit incredible. It probably seemed a bit incredible to Mary too. And Joseph. And quite possibly these magi wondering if they had *really* lost it this time.

But they bring another gift with them too. As the newness and adrenalin wear off, as each day just becomes another one again, they bring something much more precious. A gift that is no awkward burden while trying to escape Herod's soldiers, but a gift that, on the contrary, helps to shoulder the load, the responsibility, of being a parent, even to the Son of God. The incredible gift of belief.

When we don't believe in ourselves but we learn that someone else does believe in us, it's amazing. It lifts the spirits, brings us new confidence, new strength. Having someone believe in us, or believe in our aims, or believe in our gifts - now that a real gift in itself. It's inspiring, refreshing, helps us to believe in ourselves. Helps us - to believe.

Along come the magi and say to Mary: "We believe in this son of yours. We believe that he is a King. We know it's incredible, we know what it looks like to almost everyone else, but, dear Mary, we're with you on this one. We believe that through him, God will make all things well. For the whole world. Improbable though that seems, since it's all in such a state - and we should know, the things we've seen on our journey! But, dear Mary, God is coming into his own now. Literally. In this child, God is bringing in his kingdom.

"We know we don't know how that's going to happen, we just know it will. We don't know why it's like this, but we're trusting. We're not entirely sure why we're here, but we know it's important. This is what we bring to you today, Mary and Joseph, and to your son. We bring our belief that this is a world-changing moment. You're right to call him Jesus, the one who saves, the one who makes things right again. God knows how he's going to do it. But he will.

“So let us offer to you our humble awe. Let us bring you our confidence. Let us reassure you of our wholehearted belief in this precious beginning - of a life, of a story, of a salvation miracle. Take this gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Let it symbolise our belief in the promises God makes in your miraculous new-born son. Let it remind you in future years, when you might wonder what it’s all about, that it’s true. Let it bring you time and again our reassurances that somehow, all this is worth it, all this is worth believing in.”

So they take their leave, these three. No one actually calls them Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar until several centuries later. Whatever the real historical facts of the story, one thing is clear: *this is about belief*. Belief that takes three incredible men, with incredible gifts, to an incredible baby, born, incredibly, in some manner of hovel in Bethlehem. Now that’s belief for you.

Belief is a gift, yes. It brings confidence: in ourselves, in other people, in God. It brings hope: that the best is yet to come, and that God’s got it sorted even when it doesn’t look like it day to day. It brings peace, reassurance, steadiness. Rather than being a burden, it helps us to carry all that we have to bear throughout our lives. This I know.

But if it’s a gift, then surely it’s up to the giver to give it? We can’t get hold of it by ourselves? We have to wait until we receive it? There’s more to it than that. We can’t receive gifts if we don’t connect with the giver, if we don’t make ourselves available to the giver. We can’t receive gifts if we don’t actually see them or notice them or realise that they’re for us. We can’t receive gifts if we don’t want to receive them. God is a good giver - the gift of belief is always on offer, incredible though that might seem to many of us.

So there are things that can help us to receive the gift of belief. Three examples. There’s the man who in the Gospel of Mark prays, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief!” He prays for the gift of belief. If you want to receive the gift of belief, then pray for it. That way you’ll be making yourself available to the God who gives, you’re letting God the giver connect with you.

There's one another. There are those who have a humble belief, those whose belief quietly changes their lives, whose belief directs their choices, whose belief lightens their eyes and makes them, frankly, good people to spend time with. By daring to talk about our beliefs – however minuscule or grand - we can help ourselves and each other to realise what it is we might be looking for. It's entirely two-way thing; don't be afraid of owning it, of owning up to it. It will only help us encourage each other. Just like those who gathered around the baby God, the infant Jesus.

And then there's all the historical gifts the Church has given us. This term and next in Evensong we're thinking about the Creeds. Believe it or not.... The creeds are a gift to us in our belief, however big or small or hoped-for. They have been worried over, discussed at great length, they've even had lives lost over them. We should value them as conversation starters, phrases to make us think, words to help us make sense of things.

The Creeds help *shape* our beliefs, they help *share* our beliefs. So let this be your Epiphany gift.

Because however meandering and full of disbelief our own beliefs are, the Creed is a time not only to decide whether or not to join in the words aloud ourselves, but also to *hear others* declaring their faith, whether rocky or set in stone.

Remember that others believe this too. That's we're in it together with a whole raft of other people, through the ages, through the world. Thank God.

What's even better is that God, our giver, doesn't need a thank-you letter. All he wants is for you to receive his gifts.