

Epiphany Evensong Sermon 2014, 19 January 5.30pm Jesus College Chapel Oxford

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12
Ps 72

A poem:

BC: AD

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

U.A. Fanthorpe (1929-2009)

Haphazard by starlight. So that's where the title of this sermon comes from: "three / Members of an obscure Persian sect / Walked haphazard by starlight straight / Into the kingdom of heaven." A journey guided by light, haphazard and yet straight, a journey to a place of light.

This term in Chapel our theme is "Faith and Place". Have a peek at your term card when you get home, go on, you know you want to. So - how to relate Faith and Place to the Epiphany, the feast which follows the twelve days of Christmas, and the season which now lasts until Candlemas on the 2 February?

Faith and Place, and the Epiphany. Well, faith is definitely the word for it, because it's quite hard to know in fact whether or how any of this really happened. It's only the

Gospel of St. Matthew that tells this story, for one. Mark's Gospel doesn't even have a birth narrative, while the Gospel of Luke the historian doesn't say anything about the Magi. And indeed it was probably slightly odd if the highly suspicious and "disturbed" King Herod both (a) helped priests, who were his mutual enemies, and (b) then didn't send spies or escorts to keep an eye on them. And then the star actually seems to violate the laws of astronomy. So how factual all this is is perhaps somewhat in doubt.

Historical darkness. This story became embellished through the centuries. The Magi, Wise Men, Kings even got names, and tradition has it that they are buried in the great Cologne Cathedral where the choir sang last summer. We can't be sure how much of it is factual, but we can be sure that it is a good story. And a good story that is rather revealing. Revealing – in a good way, of course.

Epiphany, after all, literally means "giving light to", "providing illumination", "revelation", "showing oneself to" or "appearing". For St. Matthew, this is a story which makes clear Jesus Christ's identity as a King, the Son of God, and a human being, because of the gifts given (royal gold, prayerful incense, myrrh for embalming). This is a story which makes clear how people from all nations and backgrounds would come to the humble Jesus, bow down before him, and give him what they could. And this is a story which makes clear the connections with scripture.

Stories. I expect you've got some good Christmas or New Year stories that you've been sharing with your friends. Me too. I was at a rather posh meal during the vac with friends, and they had invited some other friends too. I was enjoying chatting to the bloke on my left, who was telling me about his climbing Everest (impressive) and his time at Cambridge (never mind). Then the butler brought around the custard (yes, we were well through the meal). "Your Royal Highness?" he said. "Your Royal Highness?" I whispered. It transpired I had been sitting next to a prince for an hour and a half, blissfully unaware. And not any old prince, but that's another story. Don't worry, he wasn't a prince I should immediately have known. But I can tell you he was

not a Persian prince, and he hadn't travelled in any way haphazardly. I imagine he'd had a chauffeur and probably some manner of Range Rover with blacked out windows.

We like stories. St. Matthew also liked stories. Stories which could teach us things, stories which were illuminating, stories which could make sense of things. Back to our illuminating Epiphany story of royals. The other reading we heard today, from Isaiah chapter 60, is all about illumination, light. The Septuagint translation of the original Hebrew into Greek opens "Photizou, photizou", a rhetorical repeated rendering that commands "Give light, Give light!" Photizou is like the Phos Hilaron the choir sang at the back: Phos and photizou, like photographs, all about light. Matthew's Epiphany story connects the infant Jesus with the glory of the Lord in Isaiah 60 verse 3: "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Verse 5: "To you the riches of the nations will come." Verse 6: "camels... bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord."

In telling this story, Matthew is spotlighting Jesus and who he is. He is connecting him with Israel's story of salvation. He is connecting him with Gentiles, nations outside Israel. He is telling us that the incarnation of the Son of God is that moment of which we heard that "Before / Turned into After." Whether the story is fact or not, it gives illuminating truths. Like the poem.

Anyone who was at the Carol Service last term will know I like using the Chapel as a visual aid. And our Chapel is a glorious blaze of light tonight, thanks to some generous gifts from alumni. But if you opened up the roof now, bare to the sky, the light that surrounds you would prevent you seeing the stars. Stars shine brightest in deep darkness. "Star of Wonder, Star of Night". We hear how it was by such a distant yet compelling light that the Magi were brought to Jesus. And in Jesus' presence they walked "straight into the kingdom of heaven", a place of perpetual light. From the Orient, the place of the rising sun, to a place where the sun never sets.

It can be hard at this time of year. Daylight hours are short and often gloomy. The Welfare SAD lamp gets plugged in. We want a spot of light in our lives. Well, here is some light for you. You can see for yourselves here tonight that there is light in our college. Matthew tells us that even far-off light in our places of darkness can lead us to the light of Jesus. The light of faith may sometimes be tempered more with doubt or joy, with questions or with confidence. But, however haphazardly, it is that light that can show us where true light may be found. Story or history, it's the illumination that matters. Places of light where the true light is made clear.

So when you are bowed down by the dark evenings (or rowers, by the dark mornings...) think of what light is within you, what light is around you, however distant and flickering. Think of where even faint glimmers of true light might be leading you. Let the light of Christ dwell in our hearts and illuminate our lives, and our community. Journey by the light into the light.