Epiphany 2021

8.30 am The New Dispensation

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Throughout the Gospels, people are curious to know more about Jesus. Where is he from, What is he trying to do, Who is he?

To some questioners Jesus gives an invitation rather than an answer, “Come and see!”, he says to would-be disciples! But to others, Jesus’ seems to provide not answers to their questions, but even deeper and more searching questions in reply!

Take Pontius Pilate, for example, the Roman Governor asks Jesus where he is from as a way of trying to get to grips with who Jesus really is and what it is that Jesus really wants, but all Pilate receives by way of reply, is the rather enigmatic assertion, that Jesus’ kingdom is “not of
this world” and that he has been born “to bear witness to the truth”, something about which Pilate had already expressed scepticism in his interview with the so-called Messiah-King of the Jews.

For John - and for the writers of the synoptic Gospels, the Gospels of Mathhew, Mark and Luke, questions about Jesus’ ‘provenance’ provide the starting point for their exploration of Jesus’ true origin and being and purpose.

On one level, people knew exactly where Jesus came from: he was “from Nazareth”; people knew his father Joseph, the builder-carpenter, and they knew his mother Mary; they knew his brothers and his sisters; but on the other hand, such factual information was far from enough to ‘explain’ him, and did nothing to counter the extraordinary claims made about him or the evidence of their own eyes.

All four Gospel writers, each in their different way, try to answer two basic questions: “Who is Jesus?”, and “Where does he come from?”.

St Matthew opens his account of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection by setting out a carefully planned genealogy: a genealogy with a twin focus – one based on
the father of the Patriarchs, Abraham, and one on the great messianic King David.

Abraham is the man through whom God promises to bless all the nations of the earth, and David, is the man to whom God promises a kingdom that will last for ever!

For Matthew, Jesus’ whole ministry grows out of this carefully wrought, theologically pregnant genealogy: Jesus is none other than the Christ, the King whose kingdom can never end and through whom all nations and peoples will be blessed.

St Luke takes a slightly different tack, and he uses an equally carefully, but very different, genealogy to go beyond the promises made to Abraham and David, to trace Jesus’ roots back to God himself – “the father of Adam, the father of Seth, the father of Enos . . .”.

For Luke God’s plan, from before the beginning of creation comes, to fulfilment, at last, only in and through Jesus – “the New Adam”, the One “in whom, and by whom, and through whom”, humanity itself is reborn and Creation renewed, re-oriented, repurposed.
From the very outset of his gospel, St John pulls no punches, and he answers the questions of who Jesus is and where has comes from directly, head-on.

Jesus is, for John, none other than the eternal Word, the One in whom, and through whom, all things have come to be.

Jesus is “the Word made flesh”, the incarnate Second person of the Holy Trinity.

For John, Jesus is, unequivocally and unreservedly, “the One who is God”, the One who has “come from God”, the One through whom all who “receive” him become the very children of God themselves!

So, when St Matthew sets down the story of the journey of the Magi, it should, perhaps, come as no surprise, that it is the story of gentiles, non-Jews, journeying form the ends of the then-known world to be blessed by a newborn king.

Matthew keeps the theology coming: he contrasts Jesus, the true son of David, born in Bethlehem, with Herod the Jerusalem-based puppet-king of the Romans born in Idumea.
The star, so central to the tale, is far more than just a heavenly light, a conjunction of planets; the star is Jesus himself, who will draw all peoples of every nation and creed to himself.

Even the preposterously impractical gifts, of gold and frankincense and myrrh, point beyond themselves to say something about the mystery of Jesus: gold for a king; frankincense for a god, and myrrh the awaiting mystery of death and burial.

But whatever, this story of mysterious astrologers from the east meant to those for whom St Matthew first set down his incredibly carefully crafted gospel, the story proclaimed to us as the Epiphany gospel is what confronts us now, and the questions it tries to answer are reflected back to us as even more-searching questions: not just “Who is Jesus?” but, “Who is Jesus to me?”.

Not, “Why?” or “Where?” was Jesus born, but, “What difference does his birth, or his life or his death make to me now?”.

The stories of Jesus’ nativity were not told and retold, crafted and recrafted just so that artists could be kept in employment for two thousand years designing
Christmas Cards for Marks and Spencer, but to demand a response, to place Jesus’ invitation before all who had eyes to see, and ears to hear, to all who would have the courage to come and see!

At the end of his poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, T S Eliot makes one of those who had journeyed far from the east stop to ponder what had it all been for:

*this Birth was Hard, and bitter agony for us, like Death - our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease, here in the old dispensation with an alien people clutching their gods.*

For anyone journeying to Jesus, the journey is unlikely to be easy or soft or predictable; a journey with Jesus will be, as the Magi travellers painfully discovered for themselves, a hard bitter agony that raises more questions than it provides answers; a journeying that brings not ease, but dis-ease, or at least a dis-ease with how unsatisfactory life is, unless one has discovered its true meaning and purpose and, by so doing, has provided the answer to the question what is my true meaning and purpose and end?

I suppose the reason why we are here, on a cold January Sunday morning, at the beginning of a new year, is
because, however earnestly, or faint-heartedly, we have committed ourselves to such a journey, we have committed ourselves to seeing it through.

To see to its end, as the magi discovered, a journey into truth, a journey which begins and ends with the One in whom is found our beginning and our and our end, the meaning and purpose of birth and death and everything between and after, the new “dispensation”.

Amen.

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T S Eliot, 1927