

A Sermon for Epiphany, Choral Matins 9-1-2011

Readings: **Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43**

EPIPHANY! - Otherwise known as "*The Manifestation of Christ to the GENTILES*". (That's US, by the way!)

For centuries here in this country it's sat quietly in the shadow of Christmas as **the time when we remember the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus.**

On the basis of the time it took EZRA to journey back from Babylon to Jerusalem in OLD TESTAMENT days (Ezra 7:9), **it could have taken those Wise Men some FOUR MONTHS to arrive at Bethlehem after first seeing the star in the East.**

So the Christmas cribs showing them there with the shepherds in the STABLE are a FICTION! - By the time THEY arrive the shepherds are LONG GONE and Matthew tells us that Jesus, Mary & Joseph are in a HOUSE (2:11).

It's right, then, to see Epiphany as something DISTINCT FROM CHRISTMAS!

But suddenly, after years of being a sort of quiet and sleepy FOLLOW-ON to Christmas **Epiphany is starting to look CONTROVERSIAL!** -

Because the message of Epiphany is that Jesus ISN'T GOING TO STAY IN HIS BOX! - He might be the One sent by God to be His chosen Messiah to the JEWISH PEOPLE, but the Jewish people aren't the SUM TOTAL of who He's come for, they're just the BEGINNING of something which is going to embrace the ENTIRE WORLD.

Now, of course, to anyone who knows their OLD TESTAMENT there's nothing SURPRISING about that, is there?

God's promise way back to ABRAHAM (Genesis 22:18) was "**in your seed ALL THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED**". -

Likewise, in today's reading from the First Servant Song there in Isaiah 42:6 God says to this mysterious figure who's to come:

"I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people AND A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES".

And next Sunday we'll hear what God says in the Second Servant Song in **Isaiah**

49, to the one whom He says He's 'formed in the womb to be His servant' (v.5):

"It is too SMALL a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of JACOB. I will also make you A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES (for the rest of the WORLD, in other words), **that you may bring MY SALVATION TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.**"

Q. And so is it any WONDER as we come to the NEW Testament that we find SIMEON, moved by the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:27), saying as he holds the infant Jesus in his arms those famous words of the Nunc Dimittis:

**"my eyes have SEEN YOUR SALVATION, which you have prepared in the sight of ALL PEOPLE,
A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE GENTILES
and for glory to your people Israel."**

After nearly 2000 years of WAITING the promise to Abraham had been FULFILLED! - Here was **a Saviour for the WHOLE WORLD!** - The one prophesied in Isaiah's four great SERVANT SONGS had finally ARRIVED!

And the coming of the WISE MEN, of course, is the first SIGN of the spiritual HARVEST FROM THE NATIONS WHICH IS TO COME. -

That's why they're so IMPORTANT. -

The wise men are **the first representatives of the NON-JEWISH WORLD** (of the rest of the world beyond ISRAEL) **to come and BOW BEFORE JESUS!**

And for two thousand years Christians worldwide have CELEBRATED that fact and REJOICED in it! - Gentile Christians like ourselves have seen them as OUR REPRESENTATIVES: **the FIRST-FRUITS of all the millions to follow!** (Alleluia!)

But suddenly here in this nation of ours today it's all starting to turn SOUR, isn't it!

Suddenly we're not sure that we LIKE the idea of a Saviour for the whole world any more! -

It's as though suddenly people have woken up to the fact that there are OTHER FAITHS IN THE WORLD and think that that somehow INVALIDATES what Jesus has come to DO!

It's STRANGE, isn't it, that people should think that Christians after 2000 years

should now GIVE UP believing what they do because there are other FAITHS in the world.

That's hardly NEWS, is it! -

Jesus was BORN into a multi-cultural and multi-faith world, He GREW UP in a multi-cultural and multi-faith world, **and He died as both pagan Romans and His fellow Jews looked on!**

And as the Gospel went out into the world after His resurrection and the Day of Pentecost, it went out into a world where EVERYONE already HAD A FAITH!

There were very few ATHEISTS in THOSE days! -

And that meant that **from the very beginning EVERYONE who came to put their faith and TRUST in Him CHANGED THEIR PREVIOUSLY HELD RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN ORDER TO DO SO!** (There wouldn't have BEEN any Christians if they HADN'T! - They were ALL converts from faiths which DIDN'T believe in Jesus!)

So I'm not the least bit EMBARRASSED or TAKEN ABACK when people today say to me, "What about those of other faiths?", as though they've suddenly come up with some new CLINCHING ARGUMENT that Christians should no longer believe what they've believed for the last 2000 years!

There was no room at the Inn for Jesus 2000 years ago and there are people TODAY who want to say that there's no room for Him NOW! - **WHAT'S CHANGED?** -

HEROD had no place Him, the RELIGIOUS LEADERS who plotted to have him CRUCIFIED had no place for Him, and the ROMAN AUTHORITIES had no more place for Him than the politically correct do in Britain today!

WHAT'S CHANGED?

Q. So why should we who are Christians in the TWENTY-first Century be any more influenced to change our faith in Jesus as the world's only Saviour than our FIRST Century Christian brothers and sisters?

The problem for many people TODAY, of course, is that they quite **WRONGLY see Christian claims for JESUS as a kind of CULTURAL CHAUVINISM.** -

They see Christian insistence upon people's need for Jesus as the last remaining vestige of a now otherwise EXTINCT WESTERN IMPERIALISM which we once forced upon the world but are now terribly EMBARRASSED about!

But, of course, **to see Jesus that way is UTTERLY FALSE**, and it keeps us from seeing the truth. -

Jesus was **born in First Century ASIA to a JEWISH MOTHER** so it's LUDICROUS to think that what He says about Himself has anything to do with 19TH CENTURY WHITE WESTERN IMPERIALISM!

And quite unlike, for example, ISLAAM, the Christian faith possessed no political power WHATSOEVER for the first 300 years of its existence. -

Even if they'd WANTED to, **Christians in the first three centuries were completely incapable of forcing their views upon ANYONE!** -

In fact, for a large PART of those first 300 years **being a Christian was more likely to get you KILLED**, just as being a Christian is increasingly likely to get you killed in Iraq and Pakistan and Egypt and in many other parts of the world TODAY!

It's about time we in this country took off our spiritual blinkers, looked at Jesus AGAIN, and SAW HIM FOR WHO HE REALLY IS!

I want to read you now a short article about Jesus entitled, "***One Solitary Life***", based upon a sermon from back in 1926 by Dr James Allan Francis. -

*Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter's shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. **He had no credentials but Himself...***

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

*Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and **today He is a centerpiece of***

the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, PUT TOGETHER, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

Q. WHY? - What could possibly EXPLAIN the IMPACT OF SUCH A LIFE?

A. Only the fact that He's exactly who the Bible SAYS He is and whom He Himself CLAIMED to be - **the Son of God, and the world's only Saviour.**

As Dr Francis SAID, "***He had NO CREDENTIALS BUT HIMSELF***", - but **those were all the credentials, of course, which He needed!**

So I'm not going to APOLOGISE for Jesus in ANY WAY this morning, because there's nothing about Him which REQUIRES an apology! - **He's the One who in utterly selfless love has come and given EVERYTHING - HIS WHOLE BEING DOWN TO THE VERY LAST DROP OF HIS LIFEBLOOD - TO SAVE US!**

People of other faiths in the FIRST CENTURY had to make up their minds either to STICK WITH THE GODS THEY HAD or to come and RECEIVE HIM AS THEIR SAVIOUR AND LORD **and receive the total love, mercy and forgiveness which He'd DIED TO WIN FOR THEM.**

The SAME IS TRUE TODAY, just as it's been for the last 2000 years!

For the time being God allows us the freedom in this world of His to choose whatever gods we like.

But we won't find anywhere ELSE the grace and mercy He makes available to us in JESUS.

Q. And when you THINK about it, **HOW COULD IT BE OTHERWISE?** -

Q. Why would God have allowed His only Son to come into this world and die an agonising death at our hands upon the CROSS unless it had been THE ONLY MEANS OF SAVING US?

Q. Didn't Jesus PRAY in the Garden of Gethsemane, "**Father, if it is POSSIBLE, may this cup be TAKEN AWAY FROM ME**" (Mt 26:39), - but it WASN'T, - and so He **WENT TO THE CROSS!**

“May I never BOAST”, wrote the apostle Paul (Gal. 6:14), “EXCEPT IN THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST”.

So let's JOIN THE WISE MEN this morning, in BOWING THE KNEE BEFORE JESUS!

*There was NO OTHER GOOD ENOUGH
to pay the price of sin;
**HE ONLY could unlock
the GATE OF HEAVEN, and LET US IN.***

That's why He CAME and that's what He's DONE for MILLIONS UPON MILLIONS OF PEOPLE.

“How SHALL we escape”, asks Hebrews 2:3, “if we NEGLECT so great a salvation?”

N.B.

Sermons are designed to be preached, and to utilise the cadences and speech patterns of the preacher. The style and formatting reflect this.