

Feast of the Epiphany
All Saints Boyne Hill
Is 60 1-6
Ephesians 3 1-12
Matt 2 1-22

Is.60.4 Lift up your eyes and look around

It's the feast of the Epiphany.

What is Epiphany all about? And why is it important to separate it from the story of Christ's birth, celebrated 2 weeks earlier? In my house the figures of the kings and their accompanying camels are seen progressing slowly along the top of the bookcase towards the holy family on the table in the corner, and it takes them 2 weeks to get there (by which time, we're told that that Mary and the baby weren't there anyway because they had moved to a house).

Epiphany is a time when we recognise something else about this extraordinary story. It's something which would have been hugely significant to those who heard it early on. The arrival of Emmanuel, (that's the name given to Jesus which means God is with us), is first announced to and then discovered by Jewish shepherds on the hills near Bethlehem. But then in a different and far more mysterious way, to Magi – an ancient class of possibly Zoroastrian astrologer-priests, foreigners, who have divined the birth of a new king by reading the stars, and have come to do him homage.

Emmanuel, not just for Jews, but for everyone, starting with the strangest and most exotic; note that they are **not people like us**, who might think to look in the Bible for their understanding of who God is and what God is up to. Not people who would turn to the words of the prophets, Isaiah, or Micah, but people who looked elsewhere, whose focus was elsewhere, whose priorities and traditions were very different. These people looked into the heavens, and saw signs painted there and interpreted them according to their own traditions, and themselves began the journey to the place where Emmanuel is born.

Epiphany signals a moment of revelation, of realisation, of recognition. A TADA moment, when we recognise something to be true. The good news, which was particular, has become general. Not a hidden, esoteric secret, known only to a few initiates, but a glorious revealed truth, made known to everyone, and to be made known to everyone in their own language and tradition, and to be shared with the whole earth. God with us, all of us.

Epiphany is a time when we think about the unveiling of God's purpose. And this purpose is signalled by the arrival of strangers, people not from around these parts, who have experienced the mystery of God and of God's call and are curious and ready to find out what lies at the heart of it, even though it is found in a completely different cultural, religious and social context, and involves a pretty long and arduous journey. God is alive and active in the lives of those who are not part of the story of the Old Testament, from outside the region, from a religion which no respectable Jew would consider worthy of the name.

The unveiling of God's purpose.

And in important ways, this is what continues to occupy and challenge us in **our** lives and in our churches day by day and week by week. The unveiling of God's purpose.

Some of you at All Saints have been engaged for the past 3 and a half years in a process of discovery about God's purpose. The guidebook you've been using is known as PMC, partnership for missional church.

I thought it might be worth spending a little time on thinking about how God's purpose is unveiled through PMC, through the thinking and listening and discovering that you have done together, and how you might discover more of God's purpose.

What is PMC? Well, at its simplest, it is nothing new. It's not a whizzy new programme for revitalising the church and paying the bills. It's all about getting back to basics. It's a spiritual journey in which we discover what God is doing in our context, and what God's 'promised and preferred future' is for our church and our community. Through it we discover who our partners are and discover that the Holy Spirit has gone before us and is alive and well in these partners. Through it we risk new ways of doing the same old task of forming Christian community.

PMC has been catalytic in helping many of our churches to discover God's purpose for them and for their community. And it changes us. We dwell in the Word; we listen to each other and the world. We practice being hospitable - that means not only offering hospitality and welcome, but also building real relationships. And it includes being open to receiving hospitality, and being changed by the encounter. We are alert for who God is putting in our path, who we can work with. We discern the best focuses for missional activity - you have discerned that these are welcome, worship and schools. And then we experiment with church life, thinking about what kind of changes we would like to make, steering clear of changes which are designed just to 'fix problems' and steering towards changes which engaged the deep cultural values of our church, which engage our entire system. And then we try stuff out, with permission to fail and encouragement to learn.

Let me say a bit more about the kind of cultural changes which PMC is encouraging: Our tendency in the church, when we think about mission is often to think about it in terms of problems that need to be solved, and to come up with our best missional ideas about what we might do to solve them. An example of this in a church would be:

Problem: we don't have many children or young people in church. They don't seem to want to come. They aren't brought up to attend church. They have other stuff to do on Sundays. We can't compete, we're not exciting enough. Children today want constant entertainment...etc.

So we have a bright idea: we'll raise money and employ a children's worker who will spend all their time getting to know the children and young people and their parents and persuading them to come to church. And we'll introduce one or two things to make them feel at home - e.g. a children's corner with fun things to do to keep them quiet during the sermon.

Here's another way of thinking about it:

Problem: we don't have many children in church

Question: why do you think that might be? What needs to change?

Tentative Answer: Maybe it's to do with us. Or maybe we are concerned about the wrong issue.

Let's look at ourselves - are we a community which people with children would want to join? Are we open, hospitable, eager to listen and discover who we are talking to? Do we have a good story to tell about who God is for us and what God has done in our lives and the life of our community and our church? Do we genuinely seek the good of strangers and outsiders ahead of our own comfort, convenience and stability? Are we interested in, and concerned about the future of our young people, about their mental health, about whether they are struggling with the pressures they face? Would we be prepared to change the way we do things?

Now that particular issue is not one which you have identified directly, but addressing it may well come from the outworking of your focus on welcome, worship and schools.

Let's take them in turn, but I'm going to change the order: we'll start with

Worship

Well, that's easy isn't it. It's what we do in church. At least we know why we turn up on Sundays. We have an order of service. We sing. We listen to Scripture and someone standing up to talk about it. We pray for ourselves and others and the world. It is centred around the Eucharist. It takes about an hour. And the new service books are going to be fantastic.

Worship isn't a mechanical process is it? The mechanics of it can make us anxious. Do people know what they are doing? Is the altar properly prepared? Will we know the hymns? Do we have to share the Peace? Whose on the coffee rota and have they turned up?

Good worship on Sundays is important. And it is about far more than the mechanics of it. It is also, in some mysterious way, far more than the sum of its parts. Good worship is transformative, and it depends on us as well as on God.

I wonder if we turn up to church with excitement in our hearts, expecting to meet with God, curious about what God will say to us today through Word and Sacrament and each other. Listening for what will feed our hope? Grateful that we can come together like this in freedom.

When we prepare for worship, perhaps in a few moments of quiet beforehand, do we examine the attitude of our hearts and try to be open to receive God's love and assurance?

Our corporate worship, when 2 or 3 are gathered together in God's presence, is not an isolated event in our weekly or fortnightly schedule. It is to resource the constant worship of our hearts. The enduring melody of our lives. It is to increase in us both our awareness of, and our gratitude for the love of God, woven like a golden thread through our lives. It's a living, vibrant, organic umbilical cord through which we are attached to the Source, and receive our nourishment, our daily bread.

Let's think about Welcome

I think that this is potentially a tricky word. It is what we do when we invite people into our house, or when we acknowledge their thanks for a favour we've done them. If we're not careful, it guides us to imagine a social contract in which we give, and others receive.

But God's welcome isn't like that. Because for God, there is no us and them. There's only us, all of us, shepherds and magi, insiders and outsiders, Jew, Muslim, atheist, stranger and friend. All of us God's beloved children. All of us welcomed by God, whether in this building or outside of it. And the building is **God's** house, not our house. So 'welcome' has to be handled carefully, because it is not us welcoming them into our house, giving them a book, inviting them to sit down and observe our house rules, the way we do things around here. It's about us opening up God's space with God's generosity and hospitality and acknowledging with grateful hearts that we are **all** God's children. And more than that, opening up those grateful hearts to receive the gift that each person brings: their wisdom, their insight, themselves. Here's a huge challenge: if we look around us, in our community, and think about those we meet, not at church on Sundays, but in our daily lives - those who live, work, go to school here. Imagine that each one of them had news of God to tell us, would we be open to hearing it from them? Would it be welcome news to us? Would we welcome it?

Practising God's welcome will change us. It's not to do with getting better at smiling at people or being friendlier – though that's a good start! It's about allowing ourselves to be changed by a deep encounter with another person.

And what about **Schools**

Schools are, of course, where we find children and young people who are already loved by God. I know that you have great engagement with your local schools, an active Open the Book team, schools services, Fr Jeremy working very hard and effectively on these relationships. We could spend a lot of time talking about the challenges and complexities of engaging with school communities and individuals in them. When you're thinking about and planning school engagement, and also when you're thinking about your relationships with children and young people, I want to encourage you to think about what PMC encourages in us; think about worship, and think about welcome.

At the heart of PMC is paying attention to what God is doing, who God is doing it with, and joining in. At the heart of worship is the daily feeding of our hearts with God's love. At the heart of welcome is a breaking down of the categories of us and them. We are changed when we encounter another of God's children with a truly welcoming heart.

So God bless you on your journey as his missional people, and be closer to you this year than your own skin. God give you courage, gaiety, a quiet mind and an open and thankful heart; ears to hear and eyes to see; curiosity and wisdom to discern what God is doing in God's world around you; and hope in his promised and preferred future for you.

Amen.