

Sunday 7th January 2018
Epiphany (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 60.1-6
NT: Ephesians 3.1-12
G: Matthew 2.1-12

Well, what have you been doing for the last couple of weeks? How were Christmas and the New Year for you? If I had asked you about your Christmas a week ago then the chances are that you would have picked out particular moments, or even particular presents as characteristic of your Christmas. If you ask a child a couple of days after Christmas how it was for them, then the chances are that he or she will reply with a list of favourite presents. Perhaps as we get older we might comment on how well cooked Christmas lunch was, or whether we enjoyed the Victoria Christmas Special on television...or even Doctor Who. But with a little bit of distance from the events we give a different answer. How was your Christmas? Now you are ready to assess it and give general statements about whether it was a good time for you as an individual, or whether you enjoyed being with family or friends – or conversely whether you had quite a bad Christmas, perhaps conscious of someone missing from around your table, or whether the period was marked by arguments or disasters.

Most events have two narratives: there are the precise accounts of incidents which mark the passage of every day, and there is the 'bigger picture' story of how time has passed. For example, during the next year, the nation is going to be commemorating the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War, and there will be events taking place in this Church. The story will be told in many ways: history lessons at school often focus on the larger narrative of the relationships between European empires, and the collapse of the German fronts. But the story will also be told as snapshots of incidents within this greater narrative, perhaps as families look at letters written by parents and grandparents telling of time in the trenches, or injuries received, and we look at the memorials of those who were killed, before we remember the celebrations at the end of the War.

These are short, focused historical moments within a bigger story.

Today's celebration of the Epiphany is told as a story, perhaps we might view it as an historical moment, which can also be told as a bigger narrative. There are three wise men from the east, and they bring to the Christ child their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is presented as an historical incident, although laced with rich symbolism, and it is that symbolism which links historical moment to theological truth. The narrative is local and precise, but links through metaphor to the larger narrative which is really the purpose of Matthew's writing down of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Today's story is merely an incident, and is of little significance to our understanding of Jesus Christ, but it is consciously part of the bigger narrative of which we are also a part. We see gold for a king, frankincense to worship God, and myrrh for anointing the dead – foreshadowing Jesus' death on the cross. And there is further symbolism, because after the Jewish shepherds came as the first to worship Christ, the Gentile Wise Men from the east came to worship, echoing Paul's constant refrain that Christ came to save the Jew first, and then the Greek (that is to say, the non-Jew). This theme is, of course, picked up in our second reading today from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, when he says that "the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Lastly, we can note that the historical tale of the Wise Men echoes the prophecy of this event which we heard in this morning's reading from Isaiah.

But this is part of a dual narrative which is familiar to us in our Christian lives. Just as the story of the Wise Men is told as an historical incident which is also part of something greater, so we are historical moments in a broader history of our faith. Let us compare the narrative of our faith with, say, the accounts of individuals in the First World War. Few individual soldiers made a direct impact on the overall narrative of the war, but without the millions of men and women who participated in the War in different ways the overall narrative could not have happened. In the story of Christianity, the historical moments which we see in the faith of each of us are an integral part of the whole. We

are the historical instances of faith.

In the Epiphany story the links to the broader narrative are made clear, and the symbolism of gold, frankincense and myrrh is layered on in unmissable ways. They serve as the bridge between the two narratives. And for us we discover the bridge between the narrative of our personal faith, and the narrative of Christianity in the sacramental lives we lead. We often talk of specific sacraments – there are traditionally seven named by the Church, including those instituted by Jesus himself: Baptism and the Eucharist. But we need not confine the word sacrament only to moments defined by the Church. Instead, a sacrament is any bridge between the historical and the particular with the universal. Let's broaden our language further, and say that a sacrament is the bridge between our lives and the unbending love of God for his creation. These moments in our lives are not confined to the mediation of the Church, but are found in experiences and events at all points. The sudden sensing of transcendent love, the unexpected revelation which we experience within us, the realisation that we are submerged in another story: these are sacramental moments. And in these moments we are glancing across a bridge into the bigger narrative which is around us – life with God. One significant 20th century theologian referred to Jesus Christ himself as the “original sacrament” and this indeed helps us understand the place of Jesus Christ, because in himself he became the bridge between the historical particularity of the world, and the larger picture of divine love.

For us to live as sacramental beings in a sacramental world means that we ourselves are the bridge to transcendent divinity, reflecting the absolute fulness of Jesus Christ becoming human (as we celebrate at Christmas), but living sacramentally in the everyday. In every moment when we are taken beyond ourselves, when we cease to be the centre of the world we inhabit, we see the bridge to another story – to God's story.

When we see God's story as the real narrative, the real tale which is being told, the account of Wise Men at the Epiphany is just one moment of significance bridging into that story. But our lives can have the same significance as Wise Men. Like a soldier's experience being part of the larger history of a war, so we link our lives to the larger history of God through sacramental moments. The Wise Men touched God's fingertips in Jesus Christ: we, in our Eucharist today and in every moment of sacramental encounter, cross the bridge to touch God's fingertips.

Fr Crispin Pailing