

Sunday 6th January 2019
Epiphany (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

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

Other than taking down Christmas decorations, I think that the Epiphany is rather downplayed in our culture. A few years ago we visited a non-church-going friend on the Epiphany and she had baked us an Epiphany Cake. What is an Epiphany Cake, you ask. Well, our friend's husband is French, and apparently they are quite the thing in France, where it is called a *Galette des Rois*. It is perhaps more of a tart than a cake, in that it involves plenty of puff pastry, and as well as the usual selection of sugar and butter and flour and that sort of thing, you also need orange flower water (whatever that might be) and, most importantly, a gold paper crown (for the cake, not the cook). And then into the middle goes a dried broad bean or some other charm which it is lucky to find. A few centuries ago in this country the 'bean king' was the term for the child who found the bean on the Epiphany, and although we have lost the tradition, it still hangs on in the *Galette des Rois*.

Having just got over Christmas, I have a feeling that most of us would not really favour another fattening offering on our tables, so I suspect that the Epiphany will continue to be unmarked for as long as we all feel that we need to watch our food intake after Christmas. The French obviously feel differently.

The feast of the Epiphany is, of course, about 'revelation'. The story about wise men from the east is a metaphor for the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the gentiles, to non-Jews. As St Paul says in our second reading, "You have heard about the

administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation." Paul, although Jewish, established his principal mission amongst the gentiles, taking the Word outside the people of Israel. The feast ought to be a time of triumph and of joy.

And yet there is also something dark about our readings today. The reading from Ephesians begins with Paul introducing himself as "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." I wonder what he means by describing himself as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus". And then in our Gospel reading the well-known story of the wise men is sandwiched by their encounter with Herod, or rather their non-encounter, because on the way back they give him a wide berth, knowing that he is not too pleased about the whole 'Messiah' thing. And so from thinking about the Epiphany as a time of cakes and celebration, I am left wondering about the other side of the coin. The manifestation of Jesus Christ is not just the manifestation of Jesus Christ the God of celebration, but also Jesus Christ the God of suffering. And in case you think I am being rather dreary, remember that in two of the four Gospels – in Mark and in John – the great revelation of the glory of Jesus is on the cross, the moment when Jesus dies in great suffering.

Every church, every preacher, and every theology returns to familiar themes. There are certainly styles of church which emphasize the God of success – they usually have websites with lots of people showing whitened teeth to the public – but none of us should ever forget the God of suffering. I once knew someone who had belonged to a house church for many years, but when her husband ran off with someone else and she was getting divorced, the other members of the church did not know how to cope with her, with someone who was having a really bad time in life. In the end she left the house church and ended up in her local Anglican church which, I am glad to say, found something to say to her. Perhaps it takes a degree of bravery for us to acknowledge something so difficult, but our God is a God of suffering. And we can pray for the miraculous, and hope for

success, and we can ask for what we want, and perhaps sometimes we feel our prayers are answered, but most of the time our prayers are just part of our dialogue with God as we cry out to him in our need. And that is when we should remember the words of Jesus himself, quoting the psalms, as he hung on the cross and called “My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?” In suffering that is often our cry as well. Why have you forsaken me?

And yet, the revelation of God is often in suffering. It is, perhaps, easy to worship God when you are in triumph. It is easy to worship God when you are on top of the world. But perhaps we don't always experience him then. Experience of God is often when we are not in control, when we have emptied ourselves, just as he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. So it is in our suffering, in our loss of control, that we can be drawn to another place of control, a place where all things find shelter and embrace. It is when we are least ourselves that we most become ourselves, because we surrender ourselves to God. It is in our suffering that we call out, and it is in our suffering that we give way to our own need.

In varying degrees I have experienced suffering myself. I am human, and therefore I suffer. I am more frequently a witness to suffering, observing others as they suffer, and sitting alongside them. I am human, and so I suffer with them. All of us here suffer with and for each other, because we have the gifts of love and compassion. The greatest witness to faith which I see is those people who are in a dark place, who are somewhere difficult from which they can see no exit, who then affirm their need to pray, and ask me to pray with them and for them. The great manifestation of faith which I see is those people who, in their great need, reach out to Jesus Christ.

And if, in suffering, we experience the revelation of Jesus Christ, we should be assured as well that he is there as a friend and companion in that suffering. Jesus, who cried out to the Father, ‘Why have you forsaken me?’ is also crying out on our behalf,

not because God forsakes us, but because he knows our anguish and our need. Jesus Christ is the one walking alongside us when we need him.

The idea of a God of suffering is difficult for some to understand, because it suggests that God is weak, that he is not all powerful, that he cannot save himself. Twice in the Gospels Jesus turns away from the image of a powerful God: during the temptation he is challenged to bring the angels to rescue him, and in John's Gospel, in his farewell discourse, he muses on the idea that he could call down angels to bear him away. But he does not. Those who see him on the cross taunt Jesus, saying that he who said he could rebuild the Temple in three days cannot save himself. But the strength of God, the revelation of God, is that he does not. It would be too easy. And it would divide God from his creation which he loves, and which he wishes to draw back to himself. When I am suffering, I cannot summon up legions of angels. If Jesus Christ had escaped from his suffering, he would not be able to walk alongside me when in my suffering.

Although this sounds like a slightly depressing message, it is the message of hope in our broken world. Every day we hear of the tragedies of the world, and this week our minds have particularly been drawn to those who are driven to perilous journeys across the sea to a safer country. Every day we hear more of conflicts and wars. And every day we hear of more suffering. The message of hope, and the message of the revelation of Jesus Christ, is that within our torn and broken world, a world of suffering and despair, and a people in need of healing, God is not distant and hidden, but very much revealed and amongst us. He is the one we experience when we reach out. His is the face we see in those who care for us and minister to us. His is the face of love.

Fr Crispin Pailing