

Sunday 5 January 2025
The Epiphany

Liverpool Parish Church

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

As a child I used to delight in singing alternative words to today's Offertory Hymn, especially in church and especially if I could persuade my brother to join in and get him into trouble too.

*We three kings of Orient are
One on a bicycle, one in a car,
One on a scooter blowing his hooter,
Following yonder star.*

So imagine my surprise when I reached the final poem by R.S Thomas in his book of reflections for Advent and Christmas. The poem *A Slow Dawning*

*The first king was on horseback.
The second a pillion rider.
The third came by plane.*

*Where was the god-child?
He was in the manger
with the beasts, all looking*

*the other way where the fourth
was a slow dawning because
wisdom must come on foot.*

Whatever can it mean? There is no mention of gifts or a star, no indication of worship, just this increasingly frantic attempt to get to the child in the manger. None of it reflects our traditional images when we consider the arrival of the three kings with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And you'll notice that they most likely did not arrive together because of this speed competition.

According to this image of the Magi, they come racing in to find the *god-child*, only to find that no-one, not even the animals are paying them any attention. All eyes are turned to the slow progress on foot of what Thomas terms the fourth king, the slow approach of wisdom.

We have spent the best part of the past two weeks cocooned in the relative peace of the Christmas period. No school, not much work for many, roads fairly quiet. Most of us have been lucky enough to have a bit of a break, the chance for some rest and a quieter pace of life.

Tomorrow the frenzy begins again. We'll be back in the old routine, whatever that looks like. The decorations are packed away and suddenly it's as though none of it has happened. We will be back to being distracted by the busyness of life.

We've talked too of gifts, the presents we've received from Santa and friends and family. The supreme gift from the Father of his Son, of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. Now everything is tidied up,

the wrapping paper is in the bin, the presents stored away and on we go into another new year.

We can be so familiar with the gospel stories at this time of year, that we cease to stop and reflect on their meaning for us now and at this time. There are two messages that we can take from this poem, from these reflections on the Epiphany, two messages that are intertwined.

Firstly, never think that we can hurry God. We might come dashing in and find a gap in the day or the week for prayer or church but don't expect that God will automatically be waiting. No amount of busyness on our part, no arriving by horse, or pillion or plane will enable us to demand God's attention. God comes to us in his own time. He comes when he is ready, when he knows that we are ready to receive him, to hush our clamour and to listen to his word.

The relationship that God fosters with us is one of growing slowly into his eternal life, in becoming absorbed into him. It takes patience and humility. And it takes wisdom.

Patience because a slowing down is required, a commitment to waiting, an understanding of the gift of being passive. Humility because we are arrogant fools if we think we can command God, if we ever consider that we have all the answers, indeed any of the answers, that somehow we have the measure of God.

And then there is Wisdom, arriving on foot. The completion of the Trinity at the crib God the Father looking down on the birth of the Son, the Word of God, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the Wisdom of God.

This is the final gift of Christmas, now no longer confined to the benefit of the Jewish people but opened to us, the Gentiles, so that we may all be partakers in the Kingdom of God. As Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles puts it in the letter to the Ephesians:

this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known

Wisdom is a slow burner. What we know now has taken us a lifetime to learn and it will require us to go on learning. And under the gentle, and sometimes fierce guidance of the Holy Spirit, because there are hard lessons to learn, we are being transformed.

I mentioned the word cocoon before. This process where there is a break in the life of a caterpillar before it emerges as a butterfly. This requires the composition of the caterpillar to break down completely and to be reassembled as a butterfly. This is the process that the wisdom of God is effecting in each one of us and please God, one day we will emerge fully formed into a butterfly, totally absorbed into the eternal life of God.

Our very own Epiphany.

Revd Michelle Montrose