Sermon 09.01.22 Epiphany SL

Once upon a time I lived and worked in Germany, in the Rhineland, in Bonn, a predominantly catholic city. Epiphany was celebrated with much flourish. A Horse, a camel and some other exotic animal would process across the Minster Square bearing the three kings and the Bishop greeted the visitors from distant lands afar, flinging wide the Minster doors while the Magi chalked the annual markings on the west doors- a pattern then repeated in the homes and offices and shops of the faithful, catholic and protestant, and the faithless alike. The chalk markings are a combination of the year and three letters, so this year reads 20+C+M+B+22. The test, as to whether this was written by the faithful or not, was very simple. Non-churchgoers would say the letters stand for Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior, while the Latin faithful would say the letters stand for Christus Mansionem Benedicat – Christ bless this house. Who is to say what the chalking means? – for a rich story makes for rich imaginings.

And that’s the thing about the Epiphany- we have read into it a very particular story. Remember, as we heard, it occurs, fascinatingly, only in St Matthew’s Gospel, the most Jewish of all the versions of the Good News of Jesus Christ, yet the Magi are very deliberately penned as Gentiles. We have decided, without a shred of evidence, that there were three kings- the Gospel doesn’t tell us anything in this regard. It does tell us that whoever, and however many there were, they brought at least three types of gift: Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. Some 800 years later our forbears gave them names- Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior, again without any evidence. We painted them in our cribs as being from Africa, Asia and the Orient, once again, the story tells us nothing about their provenance, save that they came from the East. And as for their royal status as kings, again, sorry, the account just says they were Magoi- that is more like druids form Glastonbury than royals form Gloucestershire.

We have developed a very particular idea of what or who these magi might have been- and that’s why I’m glad that the image on the pew sheet this morning isn’t exactly stereotypical for our understanding. It’s a contemporary Chinese view. The point is not so much that any one tradition is correct, but rather what are we trying to do in interpreting the story our way, as opposed to any other way- so maybe 13 Magi, maybe, in that homespun rendering of the story they brought a casserole too, to give Mary a break from cooking. Maybe they all came from East Bethlehem. We just don’t know- and does it matter.

Perhaps we could profitably approach this from a different angle, lest we end up with either an anything goes, free-for-all, interpretation, or indeed an arrogant assumption that the western European model is the only one.

Here I take inspiration from the Prayer Book, which announces The Feast of the Epiphany, with a subtitle, ‘The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles’. Cranmer, in spelling out the meaning of the Epiphany, a Greek word which just means showing, making plain, revealing, surely hits the nail on the head. However we choose to put our own cultural or historical values into the mix- remember that Chelsea resident Christina Rossetti’s rather pastoral romantic poem with the words ‘What shall I bring him, poor as I am, If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb, if I were a wise man I would do my part, yet what I can I give him, Give my heart’, this showing, revealing, manifesting to us, whoever we are, shepherds or wise men, urban or rural , rich or poor, this showing to us that the love of God poured into this Jesus of Christ, so entirely that we call him human and divine, is for All people, those within and beyond Judaism, those of the first or the twenty first century, those form near and far, east and west, the whole known world. A manifestation for all.

Mathew’s Gospel never tires of making the point that in Christ- as baby, itinerant teacher, healer, feeder and provider, crucified and risen one, he is the fulfilment of all that had been awaited and expected, that’s why the Magi, whoever they were, however many they were, wherever they were from and whatever they brought with them, they are but the first of the company of pilgrims, from all across the globe and across time, who come to kneel, to pray, to follow, and we , but the latest in that line.

The Magi, we hear, went home another way, unwilling to betray their obeisance to this divine child by being forced to kneel before another king, the earthly Herod. Perhaps, this year we too might pay more attention to our way home from the Epiphany celebration, as we leave church, as we go to the office or turn on the computer, or go back to school or shop, asking ourselves what difference this encounter with God makes to us. How will our lives be different tomorrow, because, like those Magi, we have seen the Christ- in bread and wine. What gifts shall we offer, what stories shall we tell about the experience of receiving a fragile host in our hands, taking to ourselves the creator of all in a fraction of bread.

So ‘Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine:

Truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness, These are the offerings to lay on his shrine’.

These are the makers to chalk not only on our doors, but in our hearts and minds, for truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness provide for all the different road to take.

BL

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