

**7<sup>th</sup> January 2018 – Epiphany**

**Service of Holy Communion at St Stephen's**

**Revd Patrick Senior**

Last Sunday I preached on Stephen and his growth as a man of God, who humbly accepted the role of servant, yet was used by God to do miracles and wonders – and ultimately called to defend his faith in Jesus before the religious leaders of his day. At his death by stoning – as per our window – he had a vision or revelation – or Epiphany of God, in heaven and angels.

We cannot say that Stephen's death was in vain, for his witness we still value today and his example of witness in death makes him the first Christian martyr (martyr = witness). But also Stephen's death was seen by the Jewish religious fanatic, Saul, at whose feet the men put their cloaks whilst stoning Stephen.

Saul - saw Stephen and heard his defence, heard his declaration of faith, and heard Stephen speaking of Heaven.

Saul was even more determined to stop this new faith, which challenged all his assumptions of faith and religion that his education had given him.

As we know, later Saul had his Damascus Road encounter with Jesus and his life was changed. Not a fanatical denier of Jesus, but now a determined witness to Jesus – This is Paul's Epiphany/Revelation Moment – Look again at the first reading today from Paul writing to the Ephesians – verses 7/8 – look at how Paul refers to himself.

Verse 7 – He is a servant of the Gospel

- He sees himself as the least of all God's people.

But it is only possible due to the grace of God. Grace which accepts him and changes him, from being an opponent of Jesus to now being a teacher of faith. It is by Grace that Paul is changed and by which he is forgiven and renewed. Before he was an exclusive Jew – God loves the Jews only – but now he sees God's plan for the Gentiles, the non-Jews are given grace and acceptance. No longer is the faith exclusive and reserved for Jews only, but rather they are the carriers of faith in God to all people – witnesses.

There is also another word in the first reading we need to note – as it is the link to the Magi in the Gospel. The other dominant idea in the first reading is mystery – it's in v3, v4, v5 and v6. Each time, Paul is emphasising how God has revealed a mystery about faith – It has been revealed to him by the Spirit; it has been revealed in new ways, which includes the Gentiles. (Revelation + Mystery = Epiphany)

How aware are we of God's mystery and his revelation in our faith today? Are we seekers of God's revelation for us? Are we humble in our prayers to seek God? Are we expectant of an Epiphany ourselves?

So to link now with the Gospel ...

The Magi, the wise men, who came to see Baby Jesus, the infant King – these wise men aren't kings as the carol calls them – although they would have been of high standing in their community in the East. These wise men were well educated – they read widely of other religions and philosophy and they watched the stars, as they moved. (Not in the fanciful

astrological way). No they watched the alignment of stars and the patterns they created – and realised that as 3 major planets began to converge, a new star would appear to shine. What in fact it was, was three coming together for a moment in time.

Perhaps the Magi had the book of Isaiah – of the pronounced King of the Jews, and perhaps this is what sent them travelling? So these wise men had sought revelation and realised a King was being born – A King of the Jews. This led them to the royal palace in Jerusalem - v3 is very revealing – Herod was disturbed – he was threatened. Jerusalem too – why? – Because they wanted to overthrow Roman Herod. The religious leaders were sent for and they are in a flap – why? Because how have they missed the signs – not seen the star? Their devotion and education is called into question. We have to grasp how monumental this story is

- How utterly unsettling for the people of Jerusalem
- It's a sign of hope, of a King, a Messiah
- It's a sign that the centuries of waiting are over

For Jews in Jerusalem, whether educated priests or not,

- God is on the move
- God is doing a new thing
- Hope is dawning, new beginning – it raises expectation.

For this revelation of the Magi, changes the Magi lives and begin to change Jewish life too – a Messiah is born

Another word for revelation is Epiphany – when God breaks in and reveals something new.

Epiphany is:-

- Faith building
- Hope increasing
- Love enhancing

No wonder all Jerusalem was disturbed – with excitement, with challenge to the existing rule of Herod. This first Epiphany of Jesus isn't to the Jewish leaders, or King Herod. This Epiphany of Jesus is to some magi, who travel to see Jesus. The Magi are determined to discover Jesus and for no other reason than worship. Not to control the baby, or take hostage, but to bow the knee, to submit to a higher authority. These learned men are humble in bowing the knee and honouring “God made flesh” – in the vulnerable infant Jesus. Now that takes some humility to see his potential, as Messiah, as King of Glory, as Life-changer, as salvation bringer.

To have an Epiphany isn't about us, it's about what God is doing, and give Him the glory.

As I declared last week, 2018 is a year of growth in being disciples, of encountering God in new ways. Now in that we also need to develop our spiritual awareness of what God is doing – Seek Revelation, seek Epiphany of God. This isn't just fuzzy warm feelings about something! This is God-given conviction of what God is asking you to do – to step up, or step out of your comfort zone and seek God in new ways.

Look at the Magi – they left home and country to find the Infant King, and in the process, witnessed to the King and religious leaders in Jerusalem – I wonder how God might use us

in our day and time. How might he use us to bring hope, faith and love to others in new ways?

In this discipleship year, let us awaken to God each day and ask: 'God, I'm here to worship you. How do you want to use me today?' or, like Gypsey Smith I mentioned last week, draw a circle around you and say: 'Lord, may revival begin in this circle'.

2018 – a year of discipleship, a year of seeking revelation afresh, a year of growth and anticipation that God is doing a new thing among us and through us – in Burnley Wood and beyond.

Ephesians 3:14-21

Amen.