

Unfortunately, a recording of this talk was not made. Here however are notes kindly provided by John Weaver.....

All Saints. 6th January 2019. Epiphany

Talk Part 1:

Revelation and Epiphany – the revealing of God in Christ.

Albert Einstein said: ‘I never made one of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking’; and J.K. Rowling commented: ‘There’s nothing better when something comes and hits you and you think ‘YES!’ It’s that eureka moment that Archimedes experienced in his bath tub, when the water level rose as he got in – the volume of water displaced is the same as the volume of the body submerged in the water. So we can measure the volume of irregularly shaped objects.

Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement said of epiphany: ‘We must practice the presence of God. He said that when two or three are gathered together, there he is in the midst of them. He is with us in our kitchens, at our tables, on our breadlines, with our visitors, on our farms. When we pray for our material needs, it brings us close to his humanity. He, too, needed food and shelter; he, too, warmed his hands at a fire and lay down in a boat to sleep.’ (*The Reckless Way of Love: Notes on Following Jesus*)

Isaiah (60:1-6) brings God’s message for those in exile and those who have returned to a devastated Israel.

A message for those in darkness, in fear, in distress. The darkness of an alien land, the fear of oppression and

slavery, the distress of what is found by the returning exiles - the Temple and the city walls of Jerusalem lying in ruins.

A message for the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. The returning exiles and the people of the land who were left behind because they had little value or influence - this is how they must feel - no wealth, no power, their religion in tatters, no hope.

But now God addresses them through the prophet Isaiah. A message of hope. That God has not abandoned them, God still speaks to them.

A message of prosperity and influence. God says that peoples from other lands will be drawn to the wealth, power and religious life of God's people in Jerusalem.

A message about God, his purposes for his people, and his promises to them. They have a future in God's plan to continue to bring salvation to the world, and they are to be assured by God's promise to bring this about.

And this is Epiphany: hope breaking into the world, now 450 years later seen as God is born into the world. God with us, God's light, God's good news for all people, the fulfilment of God's promises to the Old Testament prophets.

We see the risks that displaced persons are prepared to run – crossing the English Channel or the Mediterranean Sea, and we hear the painful recollections of refugees from Iran, Syria and Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen. They have left a desolate land and fear if they will find anything left of their past lives if they were to return.

How can we share an epiphany hope with them?

Isaiah speaks to those in fear and distress. They have experienced dark times in an alien land, oppression and slavery, and then the distress of what they find when they return to their homeland - the Temple and the city walls of Jerusalem lying in ruins. Yet God promises hope, they have not been abandoned by God. Is this a message for the Rohingya peoples returning from exile in Bangladesh or for Syrian and Yemeni people driven from their homes by war?

God does not abandon them. There is good news for all people as every human being is created and loved by God, and is a person for whom Christ has died.

Talk Part 2.

Now we are celebrating the Birth of Jesus:

You can see the tabloid headline: ‘Stargazers Tell Their Stories.’

The so-called wise men, the mystics from Arabia and beyond, arrive in Jerusalem seeking a newly born king, and claim that they have been following a star.

‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’ they ask. ‘We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him’

How would the ‘wise men’ tell their story? They spent much time in the study of the stars, no doubt seeking to understand the universe and their existence within it.

Their view of the universe would have been similar to the Greek philosophers, who knew something about the movements of planets and stars. A ‘new star appeared’ - a comet? a nebula? whatever it was, it led them to

Jerusalem and King Herod, and from there to Bethlehem and a very different king.

T. S. Eliot recalls the story in his poem, *The Journey of the Magi*

'A cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.'
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.
 There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

Then they arrive at Bethlehem

But there was no information, and so we
 continued
 And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
 Finding the place; it was (you might say)
 satisfactory.
 All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth
 and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth
 was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old
dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.

Was it now different? They had followed a star and found a king. God had revealed something new to them. When Herod had asked the wise men, the Hebrew scholars of Jerusalem, they had quoted a Jewish prophecy about the Messiah of Yahweh, proclaimed in Micah 5:2. 'Their star' had led to a baby or toddler in Bethlehem. Is Eliot right? Could they no longer go back to their culture and rulers, their myths of creation, or even their science?

And what of the modern stargazer? Stephen Hawking died last March at the age of 76. He spent his life seeking to understand the origin of the universe, which he famously described as 'seeking the mind of God'.

On being diagnosed with motor neurone disease, he reflected: 'My expectations were reduced to zero when I was 21. Everything since then has been a bonus'. Do we see the grace of God at work in Stephen Hawking's life? He was a regular member of the congregation at the Round Church in Cambridge, and did not exclude God from his researches, but he desired to find an explanation of the universe that did not require God 'to light the blue touch paper.'

Other stargazers such as atheist Paul Davies and Christian cosmologist John Barrow conclude from their research that the universe at least *appears* to be designed with a high level of ingenuity, which may point toward its origin in God. While Paul Davies denies being ‘religious’, he does believe that the universe displays a half-glimpsed life principle, which he concedes maybe a religious conviction of sorts. John Barrow is convinced that the unique design of the universe points to a creator who planned a universe with all the characteristics required for the development of human life.

Can some of these non-Christian scientists still go back to their agnosticism, or their cosmological equations and remain unchanged?

Epiphany:

We celebrate the revealing of God’s Messiah to the world.

Epiphany is God’s revelation of God’s self. And how does God reveal himself. The birth of the Messiah is part of a pattern in the revelation of God’s plans and purposes.

Before we read the story of the Magi, Matthew presents us with the genealogy of Jesus, which contains some unusual female names amongst the more worthy Jewish men. The ‘five shady ladies’: Tamar, who played the prostitute; Rahab, who was a prostitute; Ruth the foreigner from Moab, Bathsheba, who was David’s adulterous partner, and Mary the unmarried mother of Jesus. No one is excluded from this evolving story of God’s family history.

Luke tells of the revelation, Epiphany, of Jesus' birth to the shepherds - a lowly despised group in Palestinian society. And in today's reading, we have the revealing of his birth to Gentile astrologers.

Both Luke and Matthew record the choosing of Mary to be the mother of the Messiah - a young, unmarried, Jewish peasant girl.

We find that God shows himself to people in unexpected places and in unexpected ways.

What is revealed, what do we learn from the Gospel?

No one is outside of God's love. No one is too bad - God reaches out in love and forgiveness to each one of us.

God goes the extra mile to reveal his love and truth to us - a star or a comet to guide some philosopher living hundreds of miles from Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

In Jesus, God speaks to us, reaches out to us, gets behind the fears and pain, and the excuses. God knows us, every painful and bitter experience, every sordid failure or shameful action, and as a loving parent, God offers us love and a new beginning.

This is the heart of the Gospel

We all have value. The gospel is for everyone, whoever they are and whatever they have done.

A message for those in darkness, in fear, in distress.

A message for the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden.

A message of hope.

A message about God, his purposes for his people, and his promises to them.

This is Epiphany: the revelation of God's love and grace.

Intercessions:

Lord God, you revealed yourself to the woman at the well, who was an outsider and an outcast. This morning we pray for the world – for places of longing:

For people longing for freedom

For people longing for love

For people longing for a new start

For people so bowed down that they are too tired to long for anything

Lord God, you revealed yourself to the poorest and least important of the land, the shepherds. This morning we pray for friends and family:

For those who need God's touch this season

For those who are ill

For those who are despondent

For those who just don't care anymore

Lord God, you revealed yourself to the wise men from eastern lands. Today we pray for our community

For those longing for a clear sense of direction

For those longing for a renewed sense of call and vision

For those longing for deeper relationships with friends and colleagues

For those longing to be understood and accepted

Lord God you revealed to Mary and Joseph the parents of Jesus. Today we pray for ourselves

For the confusions that lurk in our hearts,

the longings we feel to be more than we are

and for life to hold more than it does.
For longings to have taken from us the pressure to
succeed
and release from the veneer of coping.
And we pray for the longing to know God more
And his love more
And his touch more
We offer our longing and all our prayers in the words of
the Lord's Prayer.

Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72 10-15

Matthew 2:1-12

Hymns:

39 (MP) As with gladness men of old CD9 trk13

65 (MP) Brightest and best are the sons of the morning
CD9 trk15

359 (MP) Jesus calls us o'er the tumult CD4 trk3

345(MP) It came upon a midnight clear CD10 trk3