

SERMON: Epiphanies for us all – Isaiah 60-1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

Most Holy Father, on this Epiphany Sunday, we give you the thanks and praise for revealing to us your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray for the day when He will be known by all the world and your kingdom is celebrated in heaven and on earth. Amen

What Is an Epiphany?

When the word Epiphany is capitalized, it refers to the Christian feast, which we are celebrating today. This feast commemorates how God in human form as Jesus Christ revealed His divinity to the wise men who visited young Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Another way people speak of an epiphany is as an appearance or manifestation of God. Indeed the English word “epiphany” comes from the Greek word “epiphaneia,” which means “appearance” or “manifestation.” Through the power of His Holy Spirit, God appears to people in fresh ways through epiphanies by giving them important spiritual revelations. As a result of experiencing an epiphany, we understand our relationship with God in new ways, which helps us to grow in wisdom and deepen our relationship with our Father.

Our readings today provide us with some examples of God’s wonderful gift of insightful epiphanies.

Isaiah 60-1-6

God reveals through the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 60 the promise of a restored Jerusalem after the great exile. This is his epiphany and it goes well beyond the reconstruction of the Jewish homeland. When viewed through a New Testament lens it speaks of a global acceptance of the light of God, a light which shines through the promised Messiah. Verses 3 and 4 tell us: “*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together; they come to you...*”

As the New Bible Commentary suggests: “*the return of dispersed Israelites to Jerusalem is made in the model of a far greater movement, the world-wide inflow of converts into the church, and the vision repeatedly looks beyond this to the end, the state of ultimate glory.*”

Verse 6 draws us to this glory when we’re told that “*they shall bring gold and frankincense, and proclaim the praise of the Lord.*” As Christians this verse can’t help but remind us of the wise men in our Matthew reading. They were the first Gentiles to come to the light of Christ and worship Him.

Matthew 2.1-12

This account raises an interesting question, how many wise men were there? Tradition would hold that there were three, mainly because of the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. BUT the bible doesn't actually tell us how many came to Jesus. Verse 1 just says "*wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.*" So it could have been a lot more, just as Isaiah 60 implies.

Now to the substance. What was their epiphany? What did God reveal to these wise men? Verse 2 explains that when they came to Jerusalem they were asking: "*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.*"

It is likely that these men were well trained in the fields of philosophy, medicine, natural science and astrology. It was common practice for significant celestial occurrences to be interpreted for their impact on earthly matters. This is why King Herod was frightened when he heard them declare that the King of the Jews had been born. He believed in these signs and so was fearful he now had a serious rival to His throne. He immediately asked the Jewish leaders where the Messiah was to be born. They confirmed that the scripture in Micah 5.2 states it was to be in Bethlehem. So that's where he sent the wise men, asking for a report back on their findings.

Serious efforts have been made to explain the rising of the star through normal astronomical events at the time. These attempts generally focus on three possibilities: A planetary conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 7BC, a comet in 12/11BC or a nova, which is an exploding star, between 5 and 2BC. However, R. T. France argues that: "*...no known astronomical phenomena account for the movement of the star as described in verse 9 and this indicates that what Matthew describes is guidance by a miraculous occurrence, even if the initial interest of the Magi was aroused by a nova (or a planetary conjunction – or both!).*"

While we can't be sure of the method by which the epiphany was delivered we can be sure of its intent. It revealed to the wise men to vital things: first, that the Jewish scripture had been fulfilled through the birth of their Messiah. The King had arrived and He would gather to himself not just Jews but all Gentiles as well. And second, the natural response of all people to this King is to honour and glorify him.

Ephesians 3.1-12

The first of these points is keenly espoused by Paul in our Ephesians reading. He too experienced an epiphany. The mystery of God's intent to save all humanity, both Jew and Gentile was made known to him by revelation. In

verses 5 and 6 he declares: *“In former generations this mystery was not made known to human kind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*

This epiphany not only changed the course of Paul’s life, it dramatically changed the course of the church and has impacted on countless millions of people across the world.

Our Response

Each time we read accounts of epiphanies in the bible, like the three we have today, the challenge is renewed: Do we actually believe it? Did God’s Spirit really speak to Isaiah. Did the Holy Spirit actually reveal to the wise men the vital importance of Jesus? And did that same Spirit reveal to Paul the mystery of God’s desire to save both Jew and Gentile?

Even more importantly: Does the Holy Spirit still reach out to people today? I believe the answer is a resounding YES! I believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is alive and active in our world today, both because of what His Word tells us and because there are countless testimonies by Christians all over the world of their life-changing epiphanies with the Spirit.

You will no doubt have a view about whether epiphanies like what Isaiah, the wise men and Paul had, can happen today. Whatever that view may be, I believe God invites us to be open to the possibility that sometimes He can and does reveal to us His truth in ways we could not possibly explain rationally.

By way of one personal example, for many years the concept of a virgin birth was a real block for me in my faith journey. One day I was reading Matthew’s account of it and I remember saying to God: *“This is rubbish! A virgin birth goes against all the natural processes for procreation that you God have created. I just don’t get it.”* I’ll never forget the response I heard in my head. God stridently told me: “Peter, do you not think that I, the creator of all the universe, from the loftiest mountain to the tiniest molecule, do you not think that I have the power to plant one sperm inside one woman to create my Son!”

That chastening experience helped me realise how much I was trying to restrict God. I was putting Him into my own little box and saying you can only do what I understand you can do. How wrong I was! The epiphany He gave me freed me to accept the true power of God. My response was to humbly fall before our Lord and praise Him. I know that I am not alone in experiences of this kind.

During our share and prayer time if any of you feel to share an epiphany that has impacted your Christian walk, then please don't hesitate to do so.

My concluding prayer is that we may allow ourselves to step outside of whatever our personal box may be and let God be God, always praising Him in humble adoration. May we have a hunger to experience the power His Spirit and be open to grow and be changed by the epiphanies given to us. Come Holy Spirit Come.