

## **Address for Epiphany 2012**

*St Andrew's Church, Biggleswade*

*Friday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2012 – 7.30pm Eucharist with incense*

*Isaiah 60.1-6, Psalm 72.[1-9] 10-15, Ephesians 3.1-12,*

*Matthew 2.1-12*

***When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2 v 10, 11)***

+In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Firstly, a very happy new year and Holy Epiphany to you all!

It is a great delight for Becky, my wife and I to be with you tonight. This is my first preaching engagement as a married man, having only recently got married just before Christmas in a truly spectacular day with a fantastic service and Eucharist before a reception at Moggerhanger Park.

I want to start tonight by offering my thanks to the Vicar for his kind invitation to be with you at this Eucharist and to offer some insights into God's word. This preaching engagement arose out of a lunch in the autumn with the Vicar when I was sharing with him something of my work supporting the mission of More than Gold, as the church across the nation response to the Olympics in 2012 and also my leadership of Christian Nightlife Initiatives, a charity supporting the work carried out by Christians in the night time economy, through schemes such as Street Angels. It is my hope and prayer that the Vicar will invite me to share this work with you at St Andrew's in the future, as I did with Churches Together in Biggleswade but let's see how this evening goes first.

Let me move from the introduction to God's word.

This evening, we celebrate the completion of the twelve days of Christmas for another year; yes, it may not seem like it, but it's true. It has been 12 days since we celebrated the Nativity of Our Lord. I trust that Christmas has been more than simply one day but a season of joy and open discipleship because of its richness and diversity. Since Christmas Day, in the calendar we have remembered Stephen the first Martyr by Saul, St John the Evangelist, the Holy Innocents, those murdered by Herod in fear of the Christ child and the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus on New Years Day, or for those more Catholic in heart, Mary Mother of God.

For me, and I hope you as well, the season of Christmas is certainly one of joy and celebration, but also a season of the honesty of the human condition in the pain and suffering that we feel as we contemplate martyrdom and those persecuted for their faith in our own time. Christmas must continually be a call to prayer and growth in personal discipleship.

But back to our celebration tonight:

Today, as I've already shared briefly is an important day in the Christian Calendar; for the Feast of the Epiphany is chiefly when we mark the visiting of the Magi to the Christ child but much of the history surrounding this event as we know is lost. For example as we rehearse each year, were there literally three Wise Men? What did the term 'Wise Man' actually mean? Much theological blood has been given over to discussing these sorts of topic.

Yet, depressingly, the meaning of Epiphany is also lost in our common Christmas narrative too, as we retell the story of three wise men following the shepherds to visit the baby in the stable, as seen in many children's nativity plays in the run up to Christmas. Yet Holy Scripture, as we have heard again tonight tells us that there was a gap between the two otherwise the events of the fright of Herod in killing the under two's which we remember on 28<sup>th</sup> December becomes meaningless. I passionately believe the events we mark today in the feast of the Epiphany offers something particularly special and unique as we look

to a new year, and a new mission and vision for 2012.

Becky and I were in York were on honeymoon in York recently. As part of our honeymoon, we were staying in York's famous 'The Royal York, Hotel'; famous in novels, home of celebrities and now us, two newly weds from Bedford. One morning, I was picking up the news on the iphone and the headline read 'PM criticizes Archbishop on 'moral lead' and I thought, this could be the basis for a sermon as it drew me back to an incident in York some years ago when I was working there.

I was offered, and for nothing, the opinions of a man outside a shop about what was wrong with the Church, and more specifically the Church of England. His drift was quite simple; he told me that he had given up on us because we don't give people a firm moral lead in our liberal 'pick and mix' society. "All except that Sentamu, though; he says it all right". Sadly knowing I was on my way to a meeting I had to cease giving him audience. I was rather sorry to bid him farewell. In the first place it's always a pleasure to hear how the Archbishop of York registers as a true, straight Yorkshireman. And at least the man cared, or he wouldn't have thought it worth speaking to me.

Nevertheless, it got me wondering if my questioner meant, what people so often mean, when they say we don't give a firm moral lead. That is, that he wanted people like me and the Vicar to be a megaphone for his own bugbears with society. Let's be honest and to tell you the truth, I myself would quite like to be a megaphone for my bugbears. What I don't think my questioner understood is that moral teaching is less like using a loudspeaker than engaging in a conversation, just as our neighbour is not so much like a lump of dough that has to be beaten into shape than a door that has to be opened with the right key.

How does all of this fit with Epiphany?

Epiphany is defined as 'making known' or 'showing the truth'. The calling of

Epiphany invites us into seeing things differently. It is no accident that Epiphany is linked to the beginning of a new year.

Light is the key symbol of Epiphany; it is the light of the star which guides the Magi to the Christ child. Tie this with the Feast of Candlemass, which we will celebrate in a couple of weeks time, and we discover and proclaim afresh that Jesus Christ is the light of the world; Jesus is the light of God's love for all creation, or as the Nunc Dimmitts, the Song of Simeon tells us 'a light to reveal Christ to the nations'. This light is for all peoples; not just for Jews or a selective religious few. But, rather for all. This is true radical welcome at the heart of the Christian Gospel and this is, I believe something we need to lay hold of.

In Christ, the radiant light, life is different!

In the Christian liturgy for this day, Gold is presented at the Epiphany crib; this gold which is presented, should not be seen as just as expensive gift, used just buying and sellings things but a visble sign of what is means to be a royal priesthood, rooted in the Kingdom, that is the service of Christ. Reflecting back to my story at the start of this address tonight, there is a call for the church to re-vision itself in accordance to the model of Christ. This is notsomuch the church being a megaphone for social bugbears but grounded in love of God and neighbor. 2012 is certainly a hallmark for this within the church as we approach the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and then the Olympics and Para-Olympics.

Frankincense at the crib is not just a gum that when burnt gives off a lovely smell but rather it is to be a sign of prayer and worship. Regardless of whether people define me as Catholic or evangelical, because I am agurably both in different contexts, I believe in the use of smell in worship. In Pslam 144, which is repeated in the Order of Common Prayer for an evening, we use the response 'Let our evening prayer rise before you O God' which implies the use of incense.

Incense must be used as, not as an anglo catholic game or high churchy but witness to the worship of God offered as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Myth at the crib is not just special soap to wash those who have died, and no longer reside on this earth but rather as a visible sign of healing. As I have remarked before in other churches, there is a scandal that in many places there is a lacking of healing ministry taking place. Healing ministry should not be an optional extra reserved for such places as the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham and others but in operation week in week out in our churches. Prayers of healing, although comenable should not be reserved for just those in body, but also those of distress in mind or spirit. There is much spiritual healing that needs to take place.

The call of Advent, particularly in the latter days was for wider healing. Are you continuing to offer prayers for the healing of the nation; Nick Clegg, our Deputy Prime Minister remarked in his new year address to the Lib Dem's that there is many hurting in our society and this is likely to continue. What are we doing in this town of Biggleswade to bring healing? A thought on which you might want to ponder as you leave church tonight.

In the Gospel light of Jesus Christ, human existence is re-defined. The old order of sin, death and the devil have gone.

A new order rooted and grounded in love and compassion appears. Salvation is possible.

In the sight of God, the physical world which we inhabit receives a new status.

Words have a meaning and a purpose. Words are a tool to enable us to speak of the eternal.

Through word, music enables us to sing of glory of God in great churches and chapels.

Let me say it again, through the events of the Epiphany, nothing is what it seems any longer.

In one moment in the course of human history, those things which the natural world values is transfigured.

For us, we see in Jesus Christ, a manifestation of Light of the world for all people and in that we see hope for the future. This hope is not limited but something that you and I can experience, by living in accordance to the new values of love and compassion.

The message that I share this evening at this celebration is simply. Let us live life differently. Our Christian calling is to learn how to live life differently in the challenges of our age and time. We are called to invite, not in an evangelistic sense but from a missional God who loves the world to share in our new experience of the world.

Let us tonight take heart afresh and alive this message of the Epiphany. Let us be open to what God might be saying to us, as people and as a church.

I want to end my address this evening by sharing with you some powerful words from an Epiphany celebration I was at some years old. These are the words of Clyde Kilby, who died in 1984. These are his new year resolutions to seeing life differently:

1.) At least once every day I shall look steadily up at the sky and remember that I, a consciousness with a conscience, am on a planet traveling in space with wonderfully mysterious things above and about me.

2.) Instead of the accustomed idea of a mindless and endless evolutionary change to which we can neither add nor subtract, I shall suppose the universe guided by an Intelligence which requires a beginning, a middle, and an end.

- 3.) I shall not fall into the falsehood that this day, or any day, is merely another ambiguous and plodding twenty-four hours, but rather a unique event, filled with worthy potentialities.
- 4.) I shall not turn my life into a thin straight line.
- 5.) I shall not demean my own uniqueness by envy of others. Mostly I shall simply forget about myself and do my work.
- 6.) I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are, but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what CS Lewis calls their “divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic” existence.
- 7.) I shall follow Darwin’s advice and turn frequently to imaginative things such as good literature and good music, preferably, as CS Lewis suggests, an old book and timeless music.
- 8.) I shall not allow the devilish onrush of this new century to usurp all my energies but will instead, as Charles Williams suggested, “fulfill the moment as the moment.” I shall try to live well just now because the only time that exists is now. If for nothing more than the sake of a change of view, I shall assume my ancestry to be from the heavens rather than from the caves.
- 9.) Even if I turn out to be wrong, I shall bet my life on the assumption that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absentee landlord, but that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course I shall understand with joy as a stroke made by the Architect who calls Himself Alpha and Omega.
- 10.) And finally, I shall sometimes look back at the freshness of vision I had in childhood and try, at least for a little while, to be, in the words of Lewis Carroll, the “child of the pure unclouded brow, and dreaming eyes of wonder.”

And that, my friends is what the wise men saw when they came on this first Epiphany.

May these words be of our prayer this coming season as we look to the babe of Bethlehem as “child of the pure unclouded brow, and dreaming eyes of wonder.” Amen