

CHURCH@HOME: The Feast of Epiphany, 6th January 2022

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6
 Matthew 2:1-12

Reflection by Anne Edwards

2021 came to an end just a few days ago. A picture I have in my mind's eye is of a sandy beach at the end of a long hot summer's day. It's in a mess – the remains of sandcastles, footprints from dogs and children, and everywhere discarded debris – all there, and more. But overnight the tide came in and early the following morning the beach is smooth and inviting, washed clean by the sea, the rubbish and seaweed swept aside either to the high-tide mark or washed away altogether. The beach is ready to start another day.

We have just started a New Year – that week between Christmas and New Year's Day, a time used by some to review the closing year, may be making plans for their 'hopes' and trying to forget the 'fears' as the unknown year of 2022 stretches ahead.

Today, the Feast of Epiphany – a strange word not used very often. A moment of realization, a Wow! moment of discovery, a revealing – but such an event, a moment, is often preceded by searching, even though the searcher may not know what it is they are searching for: just a sense of being unsettled, perhaps what has worked before isn't working as it previously did. Perhaps our faith feels stale – we have been living through nearly two years of strange times – and we too need an epiphany of faith. If that's the case for some, even possibly all of us, how can these Epiphany readings help us.

Isaiah wrote: "Arise, shine; for your light has come." On reading this, no doubt some of us will find the music of Handel's Messiah ringing in our ears. There has been darkness over both the earth and deep darkness over the peoples, but for the Israelites Isaiah now gives them the prophecy of God's promised light to come. And for us today, that prophecy became flesh and dwelt among us in the shape and being of that baby, Jesus, whose birth we celebrated just 12 days ago.

We are living in a time of darkness ... a darkness of Covid-19 pandemic, a darkness of economic uncertainty, and the threat of climate change, all of these affecting the whole world. None of us can escape them.

As we move from the depths of the Old Testament, Matthew tells us of those strangers who turn up in Jerusalem. We know virtually nothing of these people who are described as magi, astrologers, star gazers. We don't know how many there were, or where they come from other than it was "the east". Every day, light comes into our world as the sun rises in the east, the sun faithfully rising bringing daylight, breaking into the darkness of night.

The only things we do know about them are that they followed a star, arrived at Herod's palace in Jerusalem, and, on the advice of the 'chief priests and scribes', Herod sent them to Bethlehem, where they found Mary and the child, and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh,

before turning around and heading for home by a different route. Just six verses, that's all Matthew gives us, yet these six verses give rise to this festival of Epiphany when we celebrate the Light of the World being revealed to the gentiles, revealed to us, to you and to me.

We don't know what it was that persuaded them to undertake their journey. They followed a star – and the only way to follow a star is to travel by night, in the darkness, the star indicating the right direction. We get the impression that this was a long journey. We don't know how long, but we do know they reached their destination, and 'paid homage', or 'bowed down and worshipped him', as in some translations, and gave their precious gifts.

Our journeys to Christ can be long ones – perhaps we think we've got there, but after a while may be find that there's more to discover. This kind of unsettled feeling is often the Holy Spirit ruffling our waters, disturbing our complacency, a time, may be, of drawing us closer to Jesus who, we read in John 1:35-42, asked Andrew "What are you looking for?" and, in response to Andrew's question, said "Come and see."

When Jesus asks you "What are you looking for?" how do you respond to him? When he invites us – you, me – to "Come and see", what do we find there? Imagine spending time relaxing with Jesus for a whole afternoon. How do you feel?

I remember the end of a sunny summer's day when I was staying at Lee Abbey. We had just finished "Christ in Quiet", which because it was such a beautiful evening had been held outside in the garden, and somehow I didn't want to end that moment, so I just lay back on the grass and looked at the stars. That was a moment of discovery: I was part of the enormity of Creation, yet at the same time a small and loved child of God.

The 'lights of modern living' can be a hindrance to living in the light of the Light of the World, and may be we could all find ways of spending more time with Jesus this year.

Perhaps this is a moment to recall the words of Minnie Louise Haskins, written in 1908, which became well known when King George IV quoted them in his Christmas broadcast in 1939 when World War 2 was just four months old: 'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night.'

So as we step out into 2022, let us at St John's reach out, put our hands into the hand of God, and with Jesus, the Light of the World, at our side, step out into 2022.