

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry
at the Collation of Patrick Taylor to Holy Trinity, Stratford.**

8th January 2014

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4.1-7, 11; John 15.1-11

Introduction

It's the season of Epiphany. Today's reading, from a collection of readings from the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, is by the Fifth Century Pope, Leo the Great:

‘Although this feast celebrates an event which took place many years ago [the coming of the Magi], we are not simply commemorating an episode which has been handed down to us from the past. Our bounteous God is giving us the same gift now.’

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Epiphany

The Magi: three mysterious figures from far off nations, embark on a journey. They are following a star and looking for a king.

Matthew's Gospel tells us: ‘When they saw the star that had stopped over the place where the child was, they were overwhelmed with joy’ (NRSV).

As an expression of what the Magi felt, this is a fairly underwhelming translation. It is much better in King James' Version, where it says that ‘they rejoiced *with exceedingly great joy*’. It reminds me a little of Mr Kipling's cakes. Remember the old adverts? ‘Mr Kipling bakes exceedingly good cakes.’ In language that keeps very closely to the original Greek, the Magi are described as rejoicing ‘*with exceedingly great joy*’.

The gift of the first Epiphany that Pope Leo is talking about is the gift of Jesus Christ. This is what brought the Magi exceedingly great joy and that same gift of joy continues now to be brought to all the nations.

Expecting a king, they found a child. It is as if they were surprised by the joy that this revelation brought. C.S. Lewis called his autobiography ‘*Surprised by Joy*’. In it, he attempts to describe the experience of joy that so surprised him:

‘I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world... I sometimes wonder whether all pleasures are not substitutes for joy’.

The joy that Jesus brings, as we heard in the Gospel reading, verse 11, is the same gift that the Magi received in the first Epiphany and the same gift that we celebrate in every subsequent Epiphany.

Joy

When do we feel joy? When do we find ourselves overwhelmed with joy?

It usually has something to do with love.

Shakespeare captured it here in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

“Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth.
—Joy, gentle friends! joy and fresh days of love
Accompany your hearts!”

The overwhelming joy of loving or being loved by another person.

I was overwhelmed by joy when I first saw my grandchild, in a photograph. The powerful surge of love for this baby led me to rejoice ‘with exceedingly great joy’.

Maybe that’s why Magi were filled with joy. They were so close to the very source of absolute and infinite love. What overwhelming joy to discover that that very source could be found on earth, in a person.

That Jesus is the source of love explains why Jesus could offer joy:

‘Abide in me’... ‘my joy will abide in you’... ‘your joy will be complete’.
‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.’

Abide in Jesus. When we abide in Jesus we abide in his loving of us. And we share in the Father’s loving of Jesus. We are caught up into the infinite life of God’s love – the Father’s loving of the Son and the Son’s loving of us with the love that he has from the Father.

Now we see how Jesus Christ is himself the gift: Jesus brings us into this divine loving.

According to C.S. Lewis, joy is what we desire. And when we find what gives us joy, everything else is seen to be unsatisfying; it is only this joy that can fully satisfy our desire. He found that joy in Jesus Christ. He followed the Magi in discovering that truly, as Bach wrote: ‘Jesu, is the joy of man’s desiring’.

Holy Trinity: a community of God’s love; bridgemakers into the love of God

In that first Epiphany, the Magi from far-flung nations came looking for a star and found joy, found Jesus Christ, found God in all the beauty of God’s loving.

Pope Leo the Great said: “But we see the same thing occurring before our eyes in the way in which people from far and wide who have been called by God, are receiving the light of faith.” People come from all over the world to Stratford and outlying villages to see something of Shakespeare.

Patrick – you know that Holy Trinity, All Saints and St Helen’s know that they are called to be Bridgebuilders.

- When people come from afar: Build them a bridge to Christ
- In Stratford, Luddington and Clifford Chambers – people look to their churches to play a great part in their communities: Build them a bridge to Christ
- When people come to Holy Trinity and to All Saints and St Helens looking for places of beauty – in building: Build them a bridge to Christ
- When people come looking for peace, hope, strength, comfort, support: Build them a bridge to Christ
- When people come looking for all sorts of different things – surprise them – build a bridge to joy, build a bridge to Christ

Two images to conclude:

The first image:

I began with a Pope. Here's a dangerous thing to say: I invite you to be a Pope. *Pontifex*, one of the names for a Pope, is made up of two Latin words: bridge and maker. I am inviting you to be a Pontifex; a Bridgemaker.

The way to that is laid out in 2 Corinthians 4.5: 'For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.' I am inviting you to lead your people to be Bridgebuilders to Christ. To lead them by helping these Christian communities to be communities of love – people who abide in Christ and live in the love of God and bridge that Love to others.

The second image:

Secondly, I invite you to remember your namesake, not a pope but a great Christian missionary – called Patrick – and the words of his breastplate:

Christ with me,
 Christ before me,
 Christ behind me,
 Christ in me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ above me,
 Christ on my right,
 Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down,
 Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise,
 Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me.

You have been draw into the love of God through Jesus Christ. Live in Christ. Live in that love of God. Make known God's life of love in Christ. Build your people into a community of bridge builders into the life and love of God.