

Scripture Reading for January 5th 2020

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.””⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Ephesians 3:1-19 (NIV)

3 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—² Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you,³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus —⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ,⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father,¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

SERMON: Epiphany – A Mystery Revealed!

There is a well-known story of an unknown boy who always tried very hard with his school work. Yet every time the teacher gave back his marked, exercise book, it was full of red pen. Even so, he was never phased by this, but simply took out his ruler and drew a line underneath his last work and then wrote, “New Start.” This is both a disturbing and a touching image! At the beginning of a new year we might like to do the same thing; simply draw a line and forget the past, and then look forward with positivity and hope. That’s part of what New Year’s resolutions are all about. But we all know how unrealistic it is to move forward as if the past was totally erased. Yet there *are* major events in life that, with the benefit of hindsight, *do* mark a turning point in history such that we can never view the world—or reality—in quite the same way again. For example, the Copernican Revolution changed forever the way we see our place in the universe, not as the fixed center—of focal point—of everything but on one of many planets moving around the sun. The birth of modern physics also changed our understanding of reality from the regular, clock-work universe of classical physics.¹ And in a similar way, biology has been transformed by Darwin.² World War II and 9/11 are more recent events that have forever changed the way we see the world. So perhaps we shouldn’t simply ignore this notion of ‘drawing a line’ and moving forward.³

Curiously enough, the Bible contains a line across the page that also signifies a “New Beginning,” namely the one that separates the New Testament from the Old. Many people wish the Old Testament didn’t exist at all (!) and perceive the God portrayed there as very different from that in the New Testament. However, just as we can’t understand the physics of Albert Einstein without first understanding that of Isaac Newton, so we can’t appreciate the New Testament independent from the Old. The truth is that there is *both* continuity *and* discontinuity across that biblical red-line. That’s because God has been recognised as being active in the world in *both* Testaments. Nevertheless, for Christians, the birth of Jesus marks a distinct “new start”—or a paradigm shift—in God’s way of working.⁴

Tomorrow marks *Epiphany* in the Christian calendar; it’s the time when the Church celebrates the visit of the wise men to the Christ-child in Bethlehem—as we have just heard and sung. It is easy to overlook this event and wonder why we separate it from Christmas. Actually, the traditional reason is that Luke’s visit of the shepherds celebrates Christ’s *birth*⁵ and it appears that some time has passed before Matthew’s visit of the magi,⁶ perhaps as much as *two* years later.⁷ However, there is more to it than

¹ “Modern” physics means Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, now a century old; everything earlier is termed “Classical.”

² We can also consider the Renaissance and Enlightenment as other key turning points in history.

³ There are key events in an individual’s life that also marks a turning point; e.g., conversion, marriage, divorce, etc.

⁴ New Testament writers frequently make connections with Old Testament texts to show that continuity; see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scriptures in the Gospels*. (Remember, only *centuries* later does the Christian *Bible* make this distinction.)

⁵ Luke 2:1-21.

⁶ Matt 2:1-12. This passage must be read in the context of Isaiah 60, especially verses 2-3 and 6b, and Num 24:15-17.

⁷ See Matt 2:16.

that and epiphany helps us pause before rushing on into the new year and recognise afresh the significance of God's "New Start."

Epiphany means a "revelation," a "manifestation," or an "appearance." It is *revealing* something that was previously hidden. In this case, it's the appearance of the baby Jesus to *non-Jews*—to the wise men from the East—as the Saviour of the *whole* world.⁸ If Luke's visit of the shepherds crosses *social* barriers, then Matthew's visit of the magi crosses *national* boundaries.⁹ One aspect of the God's "new beginning" is, then, one of God's inclusion of non-Jews.¹⁰ This theme is echoed in our Lectionary reading from the letter to the Ephesians. In it, Paul's commission to bring God's "good news" to *non-Jews* is described as an *epiphany*—a divine revelation—of the "*mystery of Christ*."¹¹ Consequently, we can *also* regard Epiphany as a time of commissioning. It is the season of *sending out* God's people to carry the light of Jesus Christ into a sinful, broken, and divided world. It's therefore an appropriate reminder of the *God's* mission for the Church at the beginning of a new year.

But what is this "mystery of Christ" of which the writer speaks? It's the remarkable and shocking good news that God's love and mercy are for *everyone*, not just to Jews, including those who today we might regard as *not* being religiously inclined. Moreover, this good news is *not* a mystery known only to an elite, devout few; rather it is freely available to the *whole* of humankind. Paul saw this open secret as *not* something he had *discovered* for himself, but something that *God* had *revealed* to him as fulfilling God's promise to Abraham.¹² The writer of Ephesians was passionately excited about this good news! Yet sometimes hearing the gospel message, one that begins with a baby at Christmas, can often seem stale and uninspiring because we have heard it so often before. I suggest that we need to rediscover the passion of our faith! We have to be *convinced* about what we believe, about the hope and the joy that God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ alone can bring. If *we* ourselves are not excited about this good news then why on earth should we expect our family, friends, and neighbours to be interested in this transformative message of the mystery of Christ?

⁸ Moreover, note how the wise men recognise the astrological signs that point to the "one who has been born king of the Jews" (Matt 2:2), whereas the Jewish King Herod and the religious leaders of the day *don't recognise* the signs of God's activity amongst them.

⁹ Hints of the role of non-Jews in God's salvation-drama are presented earlier in Matt 1:3.5,6 with the mention of *non-Jewish* women.

¹⁰ This is not particularly new, in fact, in that God wanted to bless *the whole world* through Abraham; see Gen 12:2-3. [Note that Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham (Matt 1:2), which reveals how Jesus is both a *continuity* in God's activity in the story of Israel and a *discontinuity*.] But by the 1st century, the Jews had forgotten that aspect of their commission. Matthew's story of the visit of the magi flags to his Jewish readers that *God* has *not* forgotten his promise to Abraham and is doing something dramatically different to bring it to fruition.

¹¹ Eph 3:2-3. Note, despite Eph 1:2 and 3:1, there are good linguistic and theological reasons to think Paul did *not* actually write this letter, but one of his close followers. This does *not* diminish its place within the Bible!

¹² Moreover, Paul regarded himself as a humble ambassador of God's undeserved grace. He thought of his service not as a tiresome duty, but as a glorious privilege. Yet he did not expect the way of service to be easy or popular; he was willing to suffer, just like Jesus the Messiah did before him. Paul describes himself as a "prisoner of Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:1), not as a "prisoner of Rome." Paul believed enthusiastically in the *Christian* cause, and so being chained to a Roman soldier was not predicament but a new opportunity.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the context in which the letter of the Ephesians was written. Jews *despised* the non-Jews as worthless in the eyes of God.¹³ Greeks and Romans *despised* Barbarians—those who lived outside of the Empire. An awareness of one’s status and contempt for others perceived to be beneath you was a way of life in the first century. In today’s world too, racism is still evident and there is nervousness over new waves of nationalism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy throughout the Western world. Into this contemporary context, fancy hearing news that a foreign family down the street has come into a large and wealthy inheritance, because they have just become citizens of our country with instant privileges identical to ours! That might sound socking to some, but that is what gaining *citizenship* or being *adopted* into a family means. Turning the tables to a Jewish perspective, it is *we* who are those foreign outsiders! The writer of Ephesians is saying non-Jews, like you and me, are *not* second-class citizens, we are just as much a part of God’s family as Jewish Christians are. We have an equal share in God’s promises and grace; *God despises no one! What an epiphany!*¹⁴

The author of this small house-church movement, in a flourish of enthusiasm and boldness, says that even the rulers and authorities must be confronted with the rich variety of God’s *wisdom*.¹⁵ But in today’s world that is obsessed by information and knowledge, what is meant here by “God’s wisdom”? Wisdom to a Jew was connected to the divine spirit and word, in other words part of God’s creative and ongoing activity in the world. In contrast, Greeks loved their intellectual wisdom, which is what the word “philosopher” means. And the secret of the mysteries of “God” was the ultimate wisdom to be discovered; everyone wanted to know *that* kind of secret knowledge. To non-Jew at the time, then, wisdom was perceived to be a secret known to an elite few, who prided themselves on possessing it and didn’t share it willingly. For Paul, this sought-for wisdom is embodied in Jesus Christ alone.

The revelation of God’s open secret for inclusion is to happen *through the Church!* Not through what the Church *says*, although that is vital, but through what the Church *is*, namely, a community in which men, women and children of every race, colour, social, and cultural background come together to worship God authentically and live out Christ’s message. In contrast, governments tend to create societies and social structures in their own boring, uniform image—monochrome and one-dimensional. Or even worse: they tend to marginalize or kill people or groups who don’t fit into their narrow band of acceptability. The Church is to be different. It is to be diverse body that *demonstrates* God’s love, forgiveness, unity, and hope; a beacon of light into the darkness of a suffering world. Our churches are, then, to make a real and noticeable difference in society. Realising *God’s* vision is something that his followers can *only do together*.¹⁶ Without *unity in love*, the church is unlikely to be effective. A minister’s

¹³ Isaiah 60:12; 45:14.

¹⁴ Eph 3:5-6. (The also speaks of being part of the same “body” [of Christ], i.e., the Church – through baptism.)

¹⁵ Eph 3:10-12 (NET). Not “through faith in him” (NIV) but “because of *Christ’s* faithfulness” (NET, NTE); this significant translational difference is a result of modern scholarship that has changed our view of Paul’s theology (i.e., “justification by faith”).

¹⁶ This bold message delivers us from reducing the gospel to only being a one-on-one, *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ, important though that undoubtedly is.

task is therefore to keep before the congregation this vision of God's new society as God's *family* and instrument of grace and compassion in the world.

In light of this epiphany, the writer prays a profound, passionate, positive prayer of encouragement for the local church. This is my prayer for St Andrew's today as we face the new year and decade ahead. Let's unpack its riches, briefly.¹⁷ Although it's a short prayer, it's dense and complex; listen to it again:

“For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on the earth is named. I pray that according to the wealth of his glory he may grant you *all* to be strengthened with power *through his Spirit* in the inner person, that *Christ* may dwell in *all your hearts* through *faith* . . .¹⁸

Let's pause and process that for a moment. The author's prayer is according to the riches of God's "glory," which is a flamboyant way of saying that he is *totally confident* that God will answer this particular request! Yet the writer is *not* proclaiming a victorious Christianity that has conquered the world, as some people imagine when they read this prayer. Paul's restrictions as a prisoner are not forgotten.¹⁹ Consequently, he is praying for an effective witness in what seems to be a powerless situation in relation to their cultural context, not unlike the church today. It is in this oppressive context that he prays that they will be "strengthened in their *inner being* with power through God's own *Spirit*."²⁰ And this phrase is poetically reiterated as "*Christ* residing in our *hearts*," our hearts being, in Jewish thinking, our wills—the place of rational thought and the source of all action.²¹ With those important background ideas in mind, the writer goes on:

“that Christ may dwell in *all your hearts through faith*, so that, because you *all* have been rooted and grounded *together* in *love*, you *all* may be able to *comprehend* with all Christians everywhere what is the *breadth and length and height and depth*, and thus to know the *love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*, so that you *all* may be filled up to all the fullness of God.²²

“Being rooted and grounded in love” mixes a biological metaphor of a tree with an architectural analogy of a foundation for a building. But roots and foundations are there so that we can grow or construct *upwards* and *outwards*. This prayer then builds on those bonds of *love* that already exist within a diverse community—together other faithful believers everywhere—so that we *all* may have the power to

¹⁷ Note also that the person is *kneeling* to pray, whereas people normally stood in that culture. Consequently, there is deep emotion embodied in this prayer—a prayer that is really *one* long sentence. Second, the use of the word “father” indicates a profound intimacy with God and points to our common identity as children of God. We are familiar with this intimacy in John's gospel (in the relationship between Jesus and the Father), yet here it is again. Moreover, the author calls fellow believers in Jesus by the generic title, “saints.” Third, Father, the Spirit, and the Messiah Jesus are all mentioned in this short prayer, so forming the seeds of what would later become the doctrine of the Trinity.

¹⁸ Eph 3:14-19 (NET, NRSV); be careful, the NIV mistranslates the end of v18!

¹⁹ See Eph 3:1. See also [9].

²⁰ Eph 3:16.

²¹ Note too that the phrase “*Christ* residing in our *hearts*” points to God who no longer dwells in the Temple, rather the risen Messiah takes up residence in the lives of his followers.

²² Eph 3:17-19 (NET, NRSV). Notice the (Greek) ‘plural’ use of “you” here.

comprehend the unsurpassable *wisdom* of God, in other words, of the *limitlessness of Jesus Christ*.²³ That news is so good—it is so wide, long, high and deep—that it is literally impossible for us to “get our heads around it”! The author’s prayer is that as we all explore with our *minds* the mystery of Jesus through diligent study, we all will also *experience* the *love* of Jesus and realise that his love is beyond *all* reason. The shocking thing for the confused world today is that such love surpasses all *human* wisdom and knowledge—all philosophy and science. The writer proclaims that by knowing and experiencing Jesus, we will literally “be filled with the fullness of God.” And what is the fullness of God? It is *Christ himself* who lives within us *all* by his Spirit.

Recognising this mystery revealed is quite an epiphany! This “*aha*” moment is *the* turning point that changes *our* view of reality. It’s a red-line that marks a new beginning. The writer of Ephesians reveals, then, an empowering and inspiring vision and invites *us all* to be part of this pilgrimage.²⁴ On this quest, the Spirit wants us to explore all that we can know of Christ and to experience his love in all its completeness.²⁵ *Let’s all therefore be a part of this divine vision and mission in the decade ahead!* The effectiveness of any church relies on it being united. Practical demonstrations of love, along with studying together, are two essential spiritual disciplines for the Church. Add prayer to that, because prayer is a vital aspect of the kingdom of God work and—consequently—we shouldn’t belittle the practice of prayer or succumb to thinking that it’s ineffective or a waste of time. Prayer brings together God’s love and power, and is evidence of our living relationship with God. Think of this specific prayer from Ephesians, then, as both a *daily* challenge *and* an opportunity. Remember, the author of this passionate prayer was convinced it’s the kind of prayer God answers. Consequently, whatever we face today, or this year, or this new decade, we have good grounds for hope. For whatever happens on our journey of discovery with the risen Jesus, nothing can separate us from God’s love. Amen. Let us pray.

²³ And here we left with a bit of a problem because the object of those four dimensions (“the breadth and length and height and depth”) is not specified by the author! (The NIV is misleading in its translation by *interpreting* what they consider to be implied by the Greek.) They give us the impression of a great vastness of something that is unsurpassable or inexhaustible, but to what do they refer? Scholars have come up with a number of suggestions. From the context of the prayer, I suggest that the phrase points to the unsurpassable *wisdom* of God: Jesus the risen Christ.

²⁴ Recall that the wise men’s pilgrimage took them first to King Herod in Jerusalem, as that was the obvious place for a future king to be born (Matt 2:103). But (divine) wisdom was to be found in an *unlikely* place, in a house in the small town of Bethlehem (Matt 2:11). That mystery revealed resulted in them worshiping the Christ-child and giving of their best to him.

²⁵ We are invited to join in this trek with all fellow believers throughout history on an expedition that is a part of God’s loving, reaching-out community. It’s a trip that we do with each other, not on our own; it’s a *team* endeavour. It’s also a journey that will not be completed until we meet our Maker face-to-face.