

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH EPIPHANY SUNDAY 6 JANUARY 2019

If we were Greek Orthodox in a parish on the coast, or beside a lake, we'd go down to the water today. I'd throw a wooden cross into the water. You'd jump in, swim out, and try to be the first to reach the cross and return it to me. If you were successful you could expect a year of blessings. Last night you might have been in a group singing carols round the parish. Some of you would have put on costumes as stock characters, including a groom and a young man cross-dressed as his bride. Try getting that past the safeguarding police.

Today, Epiphany, is a very important feast for the Church. Epiphany means 'revealing' or 'manifestation'. For us in the western Christian tradition today's focus is on the magi finding the Christ child and offering him their homage, worshipping him. Today's Collect refers to Jesus manifested to the peoples of the earth – the magi representing the Gentile world, who would find salvation in the one born as King of the Jews. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the focus is on Jesus' baptism, where he was revealed as God's beloved Son. Hence the Greek ceremonies at the waterside. We pick up this theme next Sunday, which is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ. Another occasion early in Jesus' ministry, at which he revealed his glory, was his turning of water into wine at the marriage in Cana, and that will be our gospel reading in a couple of weeks' time.

So Epiphany is about the revealing of Christ's glory, who he is. In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes about the mystery of Christ which has been revealed. We might suppose this would be something about who Christ is, what his death and resurrection mean, and in a basic sense we'd be right. But Paul puts the emphasis elsewhere. The mystery that has been revealed is that salvation in Christ is available to Gentiles as well as Jews. Two thousand years on the Church has spread throughout the world and it may not seem a big issue to us. But it was in the early years of Church. And we can use a bit of imagination to think of equivalent issues today. Why is it that so many churches are basically made up of like-minded people from similar backgrounds, whereas whole sections of society have very little awareness of the Christian gospel? What is our attitude to them? Can we acknowledge that the lights in other cultures and religious traditions can lead people to Christ – think of the magi – and that it may not be Christ exactly in the mould we conceive him? Jesus was born, lived, died and rose for all mankind.

We can think on an even broader canvas. In the biblical story Adam and Eve were placed in a garden. Their sin affected the rest of creation. The earth would no longer yield its fruit without a struggle. Childbirth would be painful. In the later writings of both Old and New Testaments the

prospect is offered of God creating a new heaven and a new earth. Creation itself is to be redeemed. There are hints of this in the gospels if we think in terms of pictures rather than doctrinal statements. Creation responds to the birth of Jesus: a star points the way to him. Trying to work out whether it is a nova, a supernova, a comet or a conjunction of planets is irrelevant. There is a sign in the heavens. Creation also responds at Jesus' crucifixion: there is darkness over the land for three hours. Creation rejoices and creation mourns.

So from Christmas' focus on the stable, Epiphany directs us to think of the universal spread of God's action in Christ. We may feel we are only tiny parts of this, but it was before a tiny baby that the rich and wealthy of this world knelt and paid homage.