

Arise, shine, your light has come [Epiphany 2019]

Isaiah 60-1-6; Matthew 2:1-12.

Do you like newspaper headlines that lead your mind in a different direction from that intended by the journalist? Since the arrival of a certain footballer at Manchester City Football Club, the sports headlines have often caught my eye. Here are just two recent ones:

“Mum’s cooking and English lessons inspire Jesus’s revival”

and

“Jesus fails to seize his big chance”.

Taken out of context, they make the mind boggle. But when we realise that Manchester City have a young Spanish player surnamed “Jesus” (repeat with Spanish pronunciation), the whole story line changes.

So, headlines can be misleading. They can be, in the words of Donald Trump, “Fake News”. The way that some carols and crib scenes reflect upon the reading from Matthew’s gospel could come under that phrase “fake news” in that –

- The men were not kings
- There were unlikely to have been three of them
- The meeting with Mary and the baby Jesus was in a house and not a stable.

These visitors were properly called “wise men” or “magi” in our reading. From the time of Daniel when exiled to Babylon from his home in Judah, we know that he was immersed in all kinds of literature and learning. Before the Babylonians, the Assyrians had been great collectors of literature and studies of astrology. In that part of the world the study of the stars and the movement of planets was undertaken to try to discern meaning for mankind.

From this background came a group known as magi who were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science and who were also known as being soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. It seems likely that Matthew's wise men were from this background.

This group of men would have been regularly studying the night sky and, some time before the birth of Jesus, they had observed a special star at its rising. Their literature and studies told them that this announced the coming of a special king.

A special star; a new great light in the sky. This is so resonant of the words from Isaiah –

“Arise, shine, your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises on you”.

This week we have had the news of the New Horizons space probe hurtling into deepest space at 32,000 mph. It is now passing the frozen world of Ultima Thule and sending pictures back to earth from 4 billion miles away – an absolutely mind-boggling distance!

If man can send a space vehicle to bring to us enlightenment about the furthest reaches of the galaxy, shedding light, if you will, on that dark area of space; how much more can the Creator of this galaxy send a new light in the heavens to proclaim the momentous arrival of His Son on earth.

As Isaiah proclaimed:

“...darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.”

This is the message of Epiphany. As people we were, if you like, in the same situation as Ultima Thule – frozen, but in our case frozen out of God's presence by our sins. But He comes to us in the person of Jesus to bring His light and redemption. In our sins we might just as well have been 4 billion miles away from God, but God comes to us in His love, in the form of Jesus – Emmanuel, God with us. We are

no longer on the edge, separated from God - as the passage from John's gospel that we read at Christmas informs us that

"...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God".

So, we have reached the Feast of Epiphany – a word that means an appearing or showing. As we consider again the account of the visit of the Magi, the time of the showing of Jesus to the wider world, some points to consider in this New Year.

In fact, three "P's", even though there are only two "P's" in Epiphany! The three P's are Proclamation, Promise and Presents.

The first P is Proclamation. In his annual state of the nation blog, Mark Zuckerberg (the founder of Facebook) proclaimed that he had spent the last year "addressing some of the most important issues" facing humanity. Quite a claim, even for a multi billionaire! The Christmas/Epiphany season is a time of proclamation.

Isaiah proclaimed light in the darkness of peoples' lives. Zechariah proclaimed the future for his son John, that he would prepare the way for the Lord. The angels proclaimed good news to the shepherds around Bethlehem – the birth of a saviour, Christ the Lord. Finally, the magi proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem that there was a child who had been born King of the Jews.

I don't know precisely which important issues Mark Zuckerberg sought to address, but this time of Epiphany reminds us that God knew what was, and is, of prime importance for humankind, and took the step necessary to deal with it once and for all. As Isaiah proclaimed:

"The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no-one, he was appalled that there was no-one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him...".

The Proclamation is that the redeemer has come and that we have forgiveness for sins and a future with God as his children.

The second P is Promise. The passage in Isaiah is one of many in the Old Testament that refer to God's promise of salvation to people. God sees, and has always seen, the lostness of people. They get tied up in their life concerns; worries about finance, housing, safety, a direction in life, a future for their children. These concerns are ageless and will always be with us. But people tend to look anywhere but to God for help and reassurance. So the promise given through Isaiah is also ageless. "Arise, shine, your light has come...". Yes, there is darkness that troubles the lives of many but there is reassurance in the promise – "But the Lord rises on you".

As with many others (probably) I have listened to Michael Buble's Christmas CD where one song has the line "For you are not alone...". God's promise to us at Epiphany is that we are not alone. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. We can trust His promise that he will never leave us or forsake us. In times of difficulty we can allow the promised light of God in to comfort us and we can allow that same light to lead us to give comfort to others.

The final "P" is Presents. The Magi opened their treasures and from them gave gold, incense and myrrh. They acknowledged the kingship of Jesus by these gifts. The chief priests and teachers of the law knew exactly where the messiah or Christ was to be born, but they took no steps to seek him. The presents remind us that we need to seek out Jesus for ourselves. Jesus does not expect rich presents from us, or at least not the rich presents the world understands and expects.

This carol's words sum it up:

"What can I give him, poor as I am... yet what I can I give him; give my heart".

That is the present God wants from us today, through this new year and every year. This time of communion is a time to receive God's love through Jesus and, in return, to give our hearts to Him.

"Proclamation" – God's Good News proclaimed to us in many ways over Christmas/Epiphany; the redeemer has come and we have forgiveness for sins and a future with God as His children.

"Promise" – in times of difficulty we can allow the light of God to comfort us and can allow that same light to lead us to give comfort to others.

"Presents" – the only present God wants from us is that of our hearts.