

Epiphany

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Preacher: Rev. Clive Jennings

[0 : 00] It's Epiphany Sunday. Today we celebrate as a church this amazing moment when the Magi visit the Christ child. It comes very late in our Christmas story and sadly some people have already packed away the Christmas decorations in the loft and the Magi come a little bit late.

Fortunately we moved it forward didn't we and we've brought them into the nativity scene and to many of our nativity plays so we actually captured the importance of their visit.

I'm so pleased that we have because maybe at school you were one of the kings. The thing about the kings in a school place you got to wear the posh clothes didn't you?

You get all those shiny gifts you got that long walk around the hall to signify the long journey that you had while everybody sang We Three Kings.

What is the importance of their visit? These adventurous blokes from distant lands so far who were powerfully drawn by what many Christians would dismiss as a pagan astrological prediction, a mystical star to meet with Jesus.

[1 : 16] That's very important in their visit. The thing is there's several things that spring to mind. Firstly don't dismiss the way Jesus draws people to meet with him.

It was a very important visit, very counter-cultural that Gentiles were being called to meet with the Christ child. We were invited in.

Secondly, whether you bring posh gifts or like the shepherds you came straight from work just as you are, their worship was equally received as precious. The Magi took quite a bit of planning.

The encounter with horrible Herod yet faithfully day in and day out following a star. The shepherds, that was a little bit more spontaneous as they were within running distance.

The wonder of meeting with Jesus, whether you planned for it or whether it just happened spontaneously, is the same effect. All worship and wonder.

[2 : 20] I'm aware at the beginning of this year that we're all hopeful of what the year may look like. Many are saying, well, it can't be any worse than the year that's just gone.

And like many, we are planning our diaries, whether you have an electronic diary or whether you have one of those new, crisp, wonderful, blank-paged desk diaries that smell new.

The new year that lays ahead offers us lots and lots of opportunities. Adventures and encounters afresh. Many that we may have planned.

Many that will be spontaneous. And when we look back, many of us had no idea at the beginning of 2020 what our diary would look like by the end of the past year.

Postponed weddings. Cancelled holidays. Lots of Zoom meetings. New ways of living. And in many ways, just new ways of surviving. I opened my diary at Christmas 2021 and I thought, I wonder what this year will look like.

[3 : 28] Will the coming year look the same as last year? A catalogue of crossed out, cancelled and postponed events. Rudian Brook, the Christian writer, author and broadcaster, is one of my favourites to follow.

And he recalls that in his diary he has poems, one for every week. And yet became distracted in all the changes of last year. As he said, they were long days and dog days.

I certainly resonated with that. Yet he decided to go back and read through his poems. One of them was The Oxen by Thomas Hardy. A poem that I hadn't really engaged with since childhood.

Christmas Eve and twelve of the clock. Now they are all on their knees. An elder said as we sat in a flock by the embers of hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek, mild creatures where they dwelt in their story pen. Nor did it occur to one of us there to doubt they were kneeling then. So fair a fancy few would weave in these years.

[4 : 37] Yet I feel if someone said on Christmas Eve, Come see the oxen kneel in the lonely Barton by yonder coombe our childhood used to know.

I should go with him in the gloom, hoping it might be so. You see the whole thing about the Magi, the star, the shepherds, the heavenly host.

There was wonder in the meeting as they were led to meet with Jesus. Who or what led you to meet with Jesus? Was it a friend?

Was it a family friend? Was it a spontaneous incident? Was it a gradual realisation that Jesus is worthy of all our praise? Who brought you to meet with Jesus?

And how many people could you bring to meet with him in this coming year? God knows may be your initial response.

[5 : 37] And I'd say I'll mentor that because he does. If we respond to his plans. How many people did Billy Graham think that he would bring to know Jesus the day that he was invited as a young man to a revival meeting on the 1st of November 1934.

And made that initial commitment to follow Jesus. Some people have made a conservative estimate and said it's something like 2.2 million in his lifetime. But so many people are still coming to faith in Jesus because of a YouTube that he made and broadcast before he returned to be with the Lord. You can count the apples on a tree. But who can count the apples in a seed? Goes the old phrase. You know I can put a lot of dates and events in my diary for 2021.

It will probably mean very little unless I am open to the prompting and the move of the Holy Spirit. And his opportunities to bring people to meet with Jesus.

And at the end of last year I looked at my plans. 2020 was a tough year for us. Yet despite the fact that we had to do things differently.

[6 : 57] With all my planning looking as if it had hit the shredder. I saw people come to know and meet with Jesus. Despite my plans. I saw people who were in desperate situations draw closer to a relationship with him in life changing and life giving ways.

It wasn't in my diary. Not in the way that I had planned it. Some people came through illness. Some people came through pain. I'm dying. I want to know what's beyond this life.

To know his comfort, his peace and a life everlasting. Some came because they had all put their trust in maybe career, pension, marriage, investments.

They all dissolved sadly. And they realised that Jesus was the one, like in the poem, that they may be a jettisoned as a child or a teenager.

And found again that Jesus was the solid rock exposed again that had always been there when everything else got washed away. These adventurous men, these magi, these kings came searching for something and found it.

[8 : 14] They weren't disappointed. They weren't too haughty. They weren't too grand to kneel in a filthy stable and worship. Who will you lead to meet with Jesus this year?

Perhaps this message will do that. Perhaps at the beginning of this year you will kneel where you are and meet with Jesus in prayer. And we'll say a prayer later in a time of prayer that you may want to join in with.

Where will you allow Jesus to arrange your priorities and your life? How will you allow him to order your diary in the years to come?

And mine as well. On that great day, how many apples will have come from the seedbed of our life in Christ? Who can count the apples on a tree?

But who can count the apples in a seed? I can hand lots of people tracts. I can hand lots of people brochures about Jesus.

[9 : 23] The same as I can send them about an article of standing on a mountaintop on a glorious summer's morning. It makes great reading. But it's the actual shared experience that changes your life.

And stays with you forever. Many of you will know that. Many of you will know that experience. That glorious moment of meeting with Jesus. Some of you will be longing for it.

Being alongside someone as they meet with Jesus, I think, is one of the most humbling and powerful experiences that we can have in our Christian life. If you're making plans for 2021, please, please ensure that Jesus is at the heart of what you are planning.

And be open to him hijacking your diary, as I say. To be open to him to be at the centre of all that you are doing. And all maybe that you are planning to do.

As Rudian Brook reminds us in that poem. And reflecting and looking back. If someone said on Christmas Eve, come see the ox and kneel in the lonely barton by yonder coom.
[10 : 37] And our childhood used to know. I should go with him in the gloom. Hoping it might be so. I pray for you in this year to come.

As you actively journey with people in their meeting with Jesus. Jesus, the one who came for all people. Shepherds, kings, saints and sinners. God's plan for redemption and rescue didn't get packed away in the loft with the decorations.

It continues. Christmas was and remains a cosmic and salvational plan for all God's people. For you and me.

In which God comes amongst us. And we are invited to meet with him in person. Be a star this year, will you?

And lead many people to meet with Jesus.