The Epiphany Of Our Lord

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[0:00] Father, send your Holy Spirit, we beg, that we may understand and rejoice as your word comes home to us.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Can you place this quote, I wonder? All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it.
There's nothing new under the sun. I expect you all got it. It's the first chapter of the book Ecclesiastes, and it's establishing the, shall I say, business-like tone which marks that whole book. Don't pretend. Don't play games. Be serious. And some of you will know that when asked my favorite book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes is the one that I mention.
Then people ask me why. It's not difficult to say. Start with, this man is an artist with words. And I must confess, I love artistry with words.
[1:34] There's a testimonial right at the end of his book commenting on his skill with words. The preacher also, it says, taught the people knowledge, weighing, studying, arranging many proverbs with great care.

The preacher sought to find words of delight. That's a wonderful phrase. Words of delight. And uprightly he wrote words of truth. Well, that's one reason.
And the second reason is simply that the man is a realist about life. A realist, that is, in his own way. He is an observer.
He looks around. He is consciously watching the world as it is under the sun. He uses that phrase over and over.
And he uses it to mean, when you're looking, shall I say, horizontally at what's going on, and God is out of sight. Well, he says, when God is out of sight, take a breath.
[2:56] Life is a depressant and a bore. Well, all right. That's wisdom, according to scripture.

So, let's ask ourselves, what is it that we've been saying to each other these past days, when we wished each other a happy Christmas, and four days ago, a happy New Year?
Have we just been whistling in the dark? Is there no hope of real happiness, after all? No.
But this is not the whole story. This is where the church's year comes in to get us thinking straight about Christmas.
And this is what I want to underline in this message this morning, because I find that in our churches, very few of us really know anything about the church's year, and certainly very few of us know anything about the light and the joy and the energy.
[4:23] Which living in terms of the church's year can bring. Am I surprising you? Well, look. You ask, perhaps, what is the church's year?

And the answer is simple. It's a layout of the gospel in terms of the calendar. In winter, we are introduced to God's plan of salvation.
We have the season of Advent, thinking about the coming of the Lord, and the climax is Christmas Day, the day that celebrates his arrival in this world.
And then comes the spring, and we have the season of Lent, which has always been understood, at any rate, intended to make us serious about our discipleship, so that our hearts will be ready for transcendent joy at Eastertide.
And then comes Good Friday, followed by Easter, and the message is redemption, and if it doesn't thrill us, there's something wrong with us.
[5:48] And then comes early summer, and it's Pentecost, remembering the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which is still a reality in this world.

The Spirit poured out on God's people. And the church year is rounded off by Trinity Sunday, which reminds us of God, the three in one, who is doing all this and doing it for our redemption and doing

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it to make new, yes, new, things that are old and have gone wrong.
And this day is halfway through what the church year describes, or was described as the Christmas season.
We tend to think of Christmas as a single day. All right. There's nothing wrong with talking and thinking in those terms, but the way the church's year teaches us to look at it is to see Christmas as a season, a season of 12 days.
As you know, there's an old song about the 12 days of Christmas. I dare say some of the older members of this congregation could stand up and sing it if asked.
[7:25] Yes, 12 days. And at the end of the 12th day comes another festival, a festival that we're particularly celebrating today, two days early as a matter of fact, the festival of Epiphany.

Now you say, what's all that about? Well, in the prayer book, the readings, the prayer, the collect set for Epiphany Sunday is headed, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.
And that's the prayer book way of referring to the event that was set for the gospel reading today and which we've just heard narrated by the reader.
And that's the visitation of the wise men who came to worship baby Jesus. It seems to me that this is a most momentous event which we tend to undervalue.
Epiphany, you see, it's a Greek word actually. It means, yes, manifestation or display or simply showing.
[9:00] Demonstration, perhaps, is a good synonym for it. The demonstration of Christ to, well, three dignitaries from somewhere in the middle or far east, Persia, perhaps.

They came, as we know from the story, because operating as they did in terms of the literally stargazing culture of nations like Persia in those days, in Persian culture, very much significance was attached to the placing of the stars.
It was supposed to yield all sorts of wisdom about life and living. And these three persons, dignitaries that they are, they have seen a star, a sign, well, a bright star, it would be, in the sky, and they have interpreted it as indicating the birth of a king, not a king for Persia, but a king of the Jews.
Well, now, that is breathtaking in itself. Outside Palestine in the first century AD, the church weren't, sorry, the Jews weren't regarded as of any significance at all.
They were simply a bit of the Roman Empire and that was that. So, what's so momentous about a king of the Jews? Well, we don't know how these wise men thought it out and interpreted it from the sign that they'd seen.
[11:10] What we do know is that they thought it was worth taking a journey of some hundreds of miles in order to worship the king of the Jews who had just been born.

I say again, it's breathtaking, really, and I don't think we always realize what an amazing thing it was for them to do.
And they brought gifts with them, as we know, gifts appropriate for giving to a king. Gold, frankincense, myrrh.
Gold pointing to royalty. frankincense, frankincense, all through the ancient Near East, pointing to deity, because incense was used in worship just about everywhere.
And then myrrh. myrrh. That is generally explained as a gift pointing to agony.
[12:30] Royalty, deity, agony. A prophetic gift, in other words, pointing to the fact that the king will be dying a dreadful death.

Well, it's, again, it's amazing, but very significant, and we can't wonder that Matthew makes a big thing of it in chapter 2 of his gospel.
Well, this is epiphany. this is an event which the Christian church all down the centuries has understood as symbolizing and proclaiming the fact that Christ's coming is not just, was not just for the Jews, but for the whole human race.
And we, of course, benefit by that. We are Gentiles, I suppose, almost, if not quite, all of us. But the gospel is as much for us as it is for anyone else.
And we rejoice in that fact. And then the prayer book in its wisdom brackets with that gospel story the first 12 verses of Paul's, of the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.
[14:03] And what Paul is doing there in very fulsome language is explaining precisely this reality that the Lord Jesus came not simply to be king of the Jews, but to be Lord and savior of the human race, the world.

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God. And well, he's writing to a, Paul is writing to a church, most of whose members undoubtedly would have been non-Jews, and he wants to make a big thing of this.
So, he says, I have been wonderfully privileged, privileged, even though at the moment I'm in prison for Christ's sake, but I've been wonderfully privileged to receive from God understanding as to what the fact of Christ is and is all about.
There's a mystery here, he says, and he's using the word mystery in the biblical sense, sense which the Greek word carried.
It's not mystery in the sense of a detective story, as we might think today. No, the mystery is a secret now revealed. Information wouldn't be spoken of as mystery had it not now been revealed.
[15:45] And the mystery is, says Paul, and here he is in verse 6 of the chapter, the Gentiles, that's all non-Jews everywhere, the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Then he goes on to elaborate that. He talks about three amazing realities. Reality number one, unsearchable riches, unsearchable wealth.
And he says in verse 8, to me, though I'm the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles, all around the Mediterranean world, in fact, throughout the Roman Empire, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.
And when he says unsearchable, he most certainly means that if you have the riches of Christ as yours, well, you never get to the end of them.
and just as in this world, it's supposed that tremendous wealth will bring tremendous happiness, not that it always does, not that it very often does, as a matter of fact, but that's, as you know, what people think, well, Paul's image is of endless riches, endless wealth, bringing endless joy, and endless delight.
[17:43] The unsearchable riches of Christ. And then he talks about the manifold wisdom of God through Christ.

To me, he says, this is verse 8, though I'm, sorry, I'm sorry, verse 9 is the one I should be reading now. To me, it's given, to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church, church comes into it now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known, not simply to the whole human race, but to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.
That's the angels. What Paul wants us to understand is that for God himself, sending the Lord Jesus, the Son, second person of the Godhead, into this world to be the Savior and Lord of the human race, this is the most momentous thing that God himself has ever taken on.
There's manifold wisdom in it. And, well, if we had time, which we haven't got this morning, I would like to launch into an exhibition of the manifold wisdom, the New Testament is full of it, and it takes a little time to spell out.
But the key features of it, surely they're known to us, and I don't need to go to town with them because you know them already.
[19:45] Jesus is the divine Savior and the Lord of all. Jesus is there, by which I mean here, for us to approach, receive, speak to, learn from.

Jesus is our companion, Jesus is our friend, Jesus is our joy, Jesus is our life.
All of those things are said in the New Testament. Well, I don't suppose that any of them are strange to any of us, but they are tremendous truths, and to live one's life in the company of Christ is, to say a certain goodbye to Ecclesiastes chapter 1 because we're no longer looking at things under the sun.
No, this is looking at reality in terms of its fullness and the presence of the Lord Jesus everywhere with each of his people is right at the heart of the addition to what we see under the sun that the gospel teaches us to make.
And the manifold wisdom comes out in the cross, in the resurrection, in the reign of Jesus, in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who progressively transforms us into Jesus' own likeness.
[21:39] it's tremendous stuff. And here is Paul referring to it in a way which is intended to get his readers focusing on it.

Unsearchable wealth, then, in Christ. Manifold wisdom displayed through Christ in the church. Yes, the church comes into it because it takes the whole church, and that means millions of us.

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Yes, it does. But it takes the whole church to realize and display the fullness of the love and the wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.
And so we today should be rejoicing not simply in our personal salvation, but in the fact that we are the church, we are the fellowship which needs to be there in order to display the fullness of Christ to those around us here in Vancouver.
And that's underlining, of course, a point which was made for us very strongly by our leadership a few months ago. and then Paul brings in the angels as we saw and he wants us to understand that the angels wonder at all of this.
[23:17] They admire it. They are amazed at it. This in, how can I say it, in theological terms, is great stuff.

And God means us to appreciate it as great stuff. This is the grace of God in and through Christ demonstrated to the whole world.
A process that began when the three wise men found their way into the stable in Bethlehem and knelt.
Matthew makes a point of telling us, yes, they knelt and they worshipped. And in that they modeled what we all of us are called to do.
It's two days still to Epiphany. but it's coming. Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas, January the sixth, and it's a day to be celebrated.
[24:29] I noticed, by the way, in the program, that next Sunday, Sunday, next Sunday morning, it's going to be celebrated once more from this pulpit. Olaf Sleigh Maker, O.C., is going to spell it out for us in greater fullness than I can do now.

And I say, praise God for that. Thank you, Olaf. Meantime, I want to finish where I started.
We use the word happy, greeting people at Christmas, greeting people at the New Year. if we have in our minds and our hearts the fullness of the Christmas season's message that a Savior has come and he is divine and he is king and he brings unsearchable wealth with him to us, well, we should be happy and I trust that we will be happy.
And that's the note on which I want to close. The Savior has come. These things about which I've been speaking are realities and the Lord Jesus has promised to be with us always to communicate the blessings of salvation and that's tremendous.
So, I say it again, a happy new year to us all in Christ, through Christ, under Christ.
[26:26] Amen. Amen.

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