

It's great to be in this Epiphany season - and (since I wasn't leading last Sunday) may you have a blessed 2020 - and does that sound weird just to me. (Blade Runner one of my favourite movies envisaged a polluted Los Angeles in 2019 - and we've passed it). Anyway... although the Christmas decorations (for most people anyway) have now been put away, it's important to realize that as Christians we continue celebrating the joy of Jesus' coming as we enter this special season. It's becoming a bit of a tradition for me to drag out a letter I read in the Times years ago from someone quite cross about how quickly we move on without due thought - and if you want Easter eggs they're already on the shelves at Home Bargains!. After numerous conversations from late September onwards with Sue's carers about 'being ready for Christmas' and why our tree, or figures of Mary & Joseph up were still up the day after Boxing Day - it always reminds me to *relax* and not be so hung up

about these things. Now although I think this is a rather extreme viewpoint (and written with a clear sense of outrage, I also think it's great):

Sir, Why... have all the television stations taken down their Christmas decorations? Even the pagans kept their trees in the house for the first 12 days of Christmas, in case the spirit of the tree invaded the building [!!]. Many of us Christians keep our trees up for the full 40 days of the festival, which lasts until Candlemas...most people have been swept up with the frenzied and chaotic Xmas thing, which generates chaos instead of peace, and greed rather than giving, and so are tired of decorations that were put up far too early. I'm continuing to enjoy Christmas by... celebrating Epiphany"

And here we are - the first Sunday of *Epiphany* 2020 which we started celebrating last week - a Christian festival that originated in the East in honour of Jesus'

baptism - and then in the West from round about the fourth century where it became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the first Gentiles to worship him - the Magi, the Wise Men (and there are some churches that only let the Wise Men near the crib last week).

So let's slow down and take stock for a moment after the frenetic comings and goings which have left many of our number exhausted and a bit strung out - or is it just me?!). We have these two biblical events to guide our worship at this time of year. The actual word "Epiphany" (as I'm sure you know) means 'manifestation' - or revealing. But revealing what? Well it's the light of Christ that has come into the world - God incarnate - God 'in the flesh' - showing us what he's like - coming to be right here amongst us in Jesus.. Last Sunday at our monthly healing service with the terribly sad news that a regular worshipper at that service (not part of our family here at St Bs

but a Mothers' Union member and well-known by many of us)) had been told that morning that her cancer is terminal. She was in the congregation and it was really difficult. So I found the words of an old Indian proverb that Margaret James from my first parish in Cockett used to use whenever she lit a candle particularly helpful:

A candle is a protest at midnight

It is a non-conformist

It says to the darkness

I beg to differ

I've said this many times to the good St Barnabas folks as I begin my 14th year here: I love the fact that we have a faith that's 'en-fleshed' - that God somehow makes special our physical, material, flesh-and-blood, day-to-day existence and struggles - by

clothing himself in our humanity - sharing all the stuff we go through; the mess, the muddles, the questions...

I don't know what 2020 has in store but once again it's begun quite literally with a bang - or bangs - that have huge implications for our world both ecologically and politically. And the season of Epiphany creates a real challenge for us. With everything going on:

- Do we honestly believe God is at work in the world he created and that he loves - enough to help us to live distinctively and differently, justly, responsibly, sustainably - in peace?
- Do we believe he has really shown what he's like in his Son Jesus Christ? And are we behaving accordingly? Are we less preoccupied with ourselves and our wants and needs as we get involved in the work of his Kingdom
- Do we believe God has something special to reveal through us as a community this year?

...because that's why we're here (our diocesan prayer for mission reminds us each time we pray).

It's ever so easy to sit back complacently and watch the familiar pass by; let *others* do stuff - but that out-of-date, old, solitary, 'leave it to the professional cleric' model (& blame her or him if things don't go the way you like it) isn't going to have much of a positive impact is it? It never has - and never will. (I've said before thankfully that's **not** the predominant idea here at St Bs as most people anyway graciously tolerate each of us in the leadership team with our different foibles - but we need to be careful, because I still sense negativity around.

John the Baptist is a good example of what mission is all about because he knows his job is to prepare the way for the coming king. And what he has to say was simple - there's no fuss or ostentation; no cleverness or manipulation, or weasel words - no carefully constructed message from an overpaid

marketing company - his was a 'strapline' straight from the hip: Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Change your thinking and your behaviour, turn 'round -if you've been going in one direction, start travelling another before it's too late. Start *thinking* differently.

Like many of our churches and chapels today everything might have 'appeared okay' on the surface. Israel - the people of God - had their new temple; they'd established worship services; their religious leaders were at least in control of the *local* community affairs. Yet John has the temerity to rebuke them for having a shallow religion - even calling the top religious leaders 'nominal' Jews - which was a *real* insult. What he was saying was that while their Judaism might have looked okay it wasn't really *useful* for anything - it wasn't making the world a fit place for the king to come.

And so he continues saying, "Get ready! - not

for him, of course, *he's not the One - but the real King is coming*". And all four gospels are agreed that what we celebrate today, Jesus' baptism, is the moment of confirmation - when *God declares his love for Jesus - audibly*. And it also tells us plainly that this was the moment when Jesus received help and accompaniment for his ministry in the form of the indwelling Holy Spirit - Whom Jesus had to rely on to be able to say and do the stuff he did. This was a new kind of humanity once again utterly dependent on God that Jesus was bringing into being

Then, as now, John was pitching his message into a time of crisis. Nothing's changed there. When I was teaching the management of change in university years ago it was often claimed that there are two Chinese symbols making up the word 'crisis' - one that signifies the negative, pessimistic: danger; but the other positive and looking forward: opportunity. Would they accept the king into their lives? Or would they

reject him in favour of the comfortable status quo?

Would they say yes - or no?!

Because that's what Jesus decided to do in his willingness to be baptised - embarking on the painful and costly path that will eventually lead to a cross. It's quite obvious that at this critical moment, with everyone watching what he'd do - and then over and over again - Jesus chose what Henri Nouwen calls 'the descending way' - the downward direction - a smelly stable to be born in - and now a muddy river chosen as the place where God was to appear - this was an epiphany - this way of hiddenness - this *descending* way. God came to us - and comes to us - in a manner no-one would have imagined. No earthquakes, no sun falling out of the sky: only a tiny son born in unceremonious surroundings, in a seedy part of a provincial Middle-Eastern town - and now joining the ranks of sinners being baptized by John in the Jordan river. Being worshipped by foreigners: Iranian

(probably) star seekers. And on & on ...?.. all the many miracles that always seemed to express Jesus' profound compassion for suffering humanity - never attempting to call attention to himself - and as a rule even instructing those he'd cured not to talk to anybody about it.

Do you remember that bit in Luke's gospel, where Jesus announces what he's about in the local Saturday morning synagogue service:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:18-19)

I wonder if we really get how radical, how explosive a claim this all is? That it's all about freedom, liberation - new life!! In our reading from Acts Peter assures us that God shows no partiality - as Justin Welby says *'if Jesus can be laid in a manger there is nowhere that is*

not fitting for him to come, no person who is unfit to receive him'.

Thinking about what this all means for us this morning...perhaps we have said some kind of provisional 'yes' to God's grand rescue scheme - where we're brought back into a relationship with God - where we have some idea that we've been forgiven and restored. Perhaps we've even followed up the promises made in our baptisms through Confirmation. But when God invites us to say 'yes' to the coming of his kingdom - to *his* reign and *his* rule in our daily lives - he's asking us to receive his gift *fully* - to know his indwelling presence - in the place of all our fretting about doing things our way and getting what we want. Maybe this is where saying 'yes' to God is so hard because it means us letting go of the reins - and letting him shape us with *his* attitudes.

Jesus' YES to humble birth and baptism (if you think about it) implied saying "No" to other ways of

doing things. So much in my life, if I'm honest (& hopefully looking back now), has been about seeking influence, power (if you like), success (certainly - and that goes out the window in Christian ministry!) kudos - yes and popularity (hah - no chance!). But this *baptismal way of Jesus* is the way of "hiddenness", powerlessness and littleness. 'Not very appealing qualities in today's '-in-your-face' celebrity culture, is it? Yet ...when we enter into true, deep communion with Jesus we find that it is the small things that lead to real peace and joy - real life - as we allow his Spirit to make his home in us.

I'd love this to be a year when you hear God speaking words of love to you - personally - as Jesus heard him: hear him say as he did to Jesus that he *loves* you - & that because you're prepared to go his way - he's *pleased* with you. Let's get rid of the stuff that gets in the way. We're created by God, Isaiah says, for his glory, and that is why he chooses to

redeem us. Not because we're worthy but because, (inexplicably?) he loves us. So try and hear the intimacy of promises like Isaiah 43 for yourself.

"This is what the Lord says - he who created you Jacob; he who formed you Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour...Because you are precious in my sight and honoured and I love you