

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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REVEALED BY THE LIGHT

8th January 2017

Matthew 2:1-23

The Christmas trees are down – or they should be – and the cards are put away, recycled or treasured, the January sales are in full swing and the school term starts again tomorrow. Christmas is over for another year. Normal life returns for good or for ill, and we just have to get one with it.

And yet, if our Christmas celebrations have meant anything other than words beginning with “over” – over-eating, overspending, over-drinking, over-sleeping – then we should welcome the end of the festival and the return of normality, because it is now, in normal life, that the wonder of Christmas can be seen and its good news can change things.

We read today of the coming of the wise men to see the young Jesus. It is perhaps a little hard for us to imagine this in any terms other than gold paper crowns and curtains for cloaks and eight-year-old children stumbling over a stage and stumbling over their lines. The reality would be a little different, and pretty bizarre. We don't know how many of these wise men there were, we don't know how they travelled, what they wore, what they looked like. (The Chinese Church has a tradition that one of them was from China, and it could be true.) We don't know how soon after the birth they arrived, but it would seem that by the time they came to Herod, they had been at least aware of the heavenly phenomenon which has led to their journey for a couple of years. Quite likely they observed it for a while before setting out. Wise men would do that, not just rush off after every new thing.

We call the day on which the church marks their coming Epiphany, which means revelation. And there is a lot of revelation going on in the story. It is not only, as we traditionally remember, that God revealed his purposes to those outside the nation of Israel, thus demonstrating that his Son had come for all the world; though that is true, and we should be so very glad for it. If Jesus had not come for all the world, but only for one nation, then we would still be living in the dark, unable to know God as our Father and Jesus as our Saviour.

But the coming of Jesus brings an epiphany in other ways as well. His coming, even as a baby, before he could speak or walk; before he could do any of the signs with which he was later to be associated; before he could say any of the thought-provoking words which were to divide opinion about him so sharply; his coming was

an event which shone God's light into the hearts of those who were around, and revealed what was really going on.

And so, when these wise men came to Jerusalem seeking the infant king, we are told that King Herod was frightened. You bet he was. Herod's life was obsessed with trying to show himself a real power in the land, even though he knew that the power he had he wielded only with the permission of his Roman over-lords. His family had once had real power in Judea, and he had a family pride which did not die out in the first century. Anyone who came to Jerusalem asking for a King of whom Herod knew nothing was going to alarm him.

I think we can see the kind of ruler he was when we read that not only was Herod frightened, but also "all of Jerusalem with him." The people would not be frightened for themselves: a new king would be a great thing for them, bearing overtones of the Messiah for whom they longed. In itself the message of a new King would not alarm, but the knowledge of how Herod would probably react to this message would throw Jerusalem into a turmoil of apprehension. The coming of the king revealed the fear and pride at the heart of Herod, and the reaction of his people reveals the manner of his rule over them.

Although he was an ethnic Arab, from Idumea, Herod was religiously Jewish. But he was not able to see this coming king as the good news that he was. He could not rejoice that this might be the longed-for Messiah, for whom the Jews waited. He could only see the threat to his carefully established position. Ultimately this leads to the horrifying climax of this part of the story in which he takes the lives of the slaughtered children as a means of buying for himself an ultimately spurious sense of safety and security.

The light of God's love coming in Jesus shines and shows up what is really there, the things which in dimmer days, in the fog of political wrangling and compromise, might be able to be hidden or ignored. He did it then and he still does it now. And we do not all welcome the shining of God's light into our lives. We don't always want to see what lives in our hearts.

The other main player in this story is not the wise men, they are more catalysts than characters. The other main player is Joseph. The coming of the wise men means that he and his family is no longer obscure and no longer safe. The wise men have drawn attention to this family and Joseph moves to protect the two people who are dependent on him. There is a great contrast between Herod and Joseph's actions towards children in this story. Herod cares nothing for lives other than his own, not for the lives of the children, nor for the grief of their families. I wonder if the people in Jerusalem expected some reaction like this? Herod cares only for himself and his own interests.

Joseph, though, puts himself out to care for the child Jesus. He makes three changes in his location, to Egypt, back to Judea and then to the region of Galilee. He takes his family on journeys which are dangerous. We are told he is to "flee" and that they set off by night, while the Greek word for "went" used in verses 13 and 21 implies going by stealth, secretly. You might say that he and his family crept away to Egypt and then crept back in due course. The coming of Jesus into Joseph's life

must have been a major inconvenience – what of his business while he was making all these journeys? But as he comes into contact with the light of God in his Son, Joseph's heart is shown to be unselfish and full of care for others.

Epiphany is when God's light is shined into our world and into our hearts. And God's light is not a gentle candle-beam whatever we might like to think at our candle-lit watchnight services. The light of God is a full-beam headlight, showing everything the way it really is, it is the sun – which we haven't been seeing much of lately – bringing out the true colours of everything our eyes light on.

This is why Jesus was and remains so controversial. It is not everyone who wants to have their inner self revealed, even to themselves never mind to God and maybe to others. The world can seem to be divided into those who think the worst of themselves and those who think the best of themselves, with a few rare well-balanced individuals in the middle – you, of course, but I wouldn't like to claim that for myself.

For those who think the best of themselves, the light of Christ can be devastating. His very goodness and faithfulness and uncompromising love shows up self-serving and anger and fear which may be masked by a smiling face. There is a reason that the Christian faith begins with repentance, with a turning away from ourselves and a turning towards God. There is a reason why at the beginning of our normal Sunday services we include a prayer of confession, of asking for forgiveness. It is because none of us are perfect and few of us are as perfect even as we seem to be or think we are. But we are called to repent, to turn from ourselves, not to dwell on our failings, and to lose ourselves in the light of Christ as we turn towards him in everything we do.

For those who think the worst of themselves, God's light needs to shine to show them that no matter what they have done, or what they are like, or what tendencies hide beneath the front the world sees, he came to us in Jesus with forgiveness and healing. The bruised reed he will not break and the smouldering wick he will not snuff out, as Isaiah promised us. Instead he gives us a new life and a new lease of life. That is why we are called to repent, to turn from ourselves, not to dwell on our failings, and to lose ourselves in the light of Christ as we turn towards him in everything we do.

The story we read this morning is not a comfortable one. We don't like to think of the plight of these massacred children or their families, and especially not at Christmas when we pray for peace and love for all. But the story of Christmas, the story of Christ's coming to be with us is not set in an iridescent bubble, pretty and fragile, such as those we hang on our Christmas trees. Jesus did not come to a festival, but to real life, life where those who want to live for themselves will react against him and the light he shines and the love he offers, and where such a reaction may take no account of the lives or well-being of others. Jesus came to real life where people are often vulnerable, and he too was vulnerable. He came to a life where the idea of home cannot be taken for granted, as countless millions have discovered through the centuries and still discover today.

Jesus still comes, to world leaders and politician, as he did then; to the poorest and most oppressed on the face of the earth, as he did then; and to you and me, to this place as to all others. He comes and his coming shines a light of revelation. Will we

welcome that revelation and live turned from ourselves and towards him, of will we grasp at what we think we have, or what we want too much, and turn from him? Is Christmas over, or does the Christ who came still change us from day to day? Amen.

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