



## **A Light to the Nations**

**A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells**

**Readings: Luke 7.1-10; 1 Kings 10.1-7; Mark 15.16-26; Matthew 2.1-12**

It's sometimes said that Ascension Day is the other side of Christmas. In other words, Jesus comes down from heaven on Christmas Day, and goes back up to heaven on Ascension Day. Hence, Ascension Day is the other side of Christmas. If that's the case, it's perhaps equally the case that Epiphany is the other side of Pentecost. At Pentecost the disciples in the power of the Spirit take the good news of Christ to the ends of the earth. At Epiphany the nations stream to Israel to behold the son of God. Hence Epiphany is the other side of Pentecost. Tonight I want to look at three directions from which the nations come.

### **The West**

I remember many conversations when I spent a summer working in the West Bank nearly 30 years ago. People would say, 'Where you from?' and when I said 'Britain,' they would invariably say, 'Ah – Balfour Declaration. You caused the problems in my country.' Few people in Britain have heard of the 1917 statement that paved the way to the coming of the State of Israel, and fewer still see the problems of Israel and Palestine as largely Britain's fault. But that's how Palestinians see it. When Jesus is approached by the centurion in Luke 7, he could be forgiven for saying the same thing. 'Rome caused all the problems in my country.'

But that would miss two important things that are going on in this story. The first is an echo of 2 Kings 5, where Elisha heals Naaman, the commander of the army of the King of Aramaea. In both cases first Elisha then Jesus sees beyond the suit of armour and sees a human being whose illness represents all that stands between them and a God they long to know. In Jesus' case, he's just uttered the command, 'Love your enemies.' Straightaway he practises what he preaches. The second thing going on is an anticipation of Pentecost. It turns out this centurion has a better idea of faith than most Israelites. It's a reversal of the Naaman story. Naaman comes to Israel and longs to know the God of Israel. The centurion represents a faith that puts Israel to shame. The seeds of Pentecost are begun.

Today we read this story and we identify with the stranger in our midst, especially the one that seems scarily to be taking over and causing all the problems in our country. This is an Epiphany story that tells us that this stranger may have a faith that puts our own to shame. Meanwhile so many in the Middle East and elsewhere still see the West as an oppressor and colonial invader. Does our faith, like that of the centurion in this story, put theirs to shame?

Let us pray. Revealing God, show us ways in which we are oppressive invaders and must repent, and ways in which we are hosts of faithful strangers, and must listen and learn. Come to us with healing and reconciliation, and show us your glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **The East**

Our second reading is full of ironies. It's clearly an anticipation of the visit of the wise men to Jesus, but in the Queen of Sheba's case the wise man is the one visited, not the one doing the visiting. The queen comes from somewhere near Yemen, which is more or less the imagined place of origin of the magi in Matthew 2. And just like the three kings of Matthew's story, she comes bearing gifts, and yet has her breath taken away.

The irony centres on the fact that Solomon, in all his wisdom, magnificence, influence, power and wealth represents what so many people in the Israel of Jesus' time were looking to restore. The meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is a kind of G8 summit of its era. She's coming from outside Israel's world, which shows how powerful Israel had become.

The story is a mirror image of Pentecost. Here the leaders of the nations come to Israel because it is the centre of power and wealth. At Pentecost poor and powerless people go out from Jerusalem into all the world to proclaim a crucified Lord who had nowhere to lay his head and died a traitor's death.

The question for us is, for what do we look to the East today? If all we expect is violence and threat, that's maybe all we will get. If all we want is wealth and influence, we maybe don't deserve to get more than we're getting right now. But what if what we expected to see were faith and hope? How would that change the way we look – and what we might find?

Let us pray. Glorious God, you shower upon us the wonders of creation, and surround us with people of wisdom, and experience, and knowledge, and integrity. Move among the powerful of our day; teach us what to worship and who to follow; and send your Spirit on the people of the middle east, that the place of your birth may once again be the place of your appearing. Amen.

## **The South**

Cyrene is on the north coast of Africa, in modern-day Libya. This third Epiphany story is again laced with irony. Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross. Where are the disciples? Where are the people of Israel whom Jesus came to save? One could see the calling of Simon as a random dragooning of a bystander to assist with Jesus' last moments. But there's nothing random in the gospels, least of all in the passion accounts. What we're seeing is Israel's chosen place at the right hand of God being offered to a Gentile.

And today the fact that that Gentile comes from Africa carries an extra significance. The early church had to get over a superiority complex between Jews and Gentiles. Today's church has to get over a superiority complex between Europeans and Africans. Most Christians in the West see Africa as the source of problems, Europe as the weary and overstretched source of solutions. This story is pushing Western Christians towards a dose of humility. Africa bore Jesus' cross on his way to Calvary. Africa bears Jesus' cross today. That might not be because Africa is getting it wrong. This story suggests it might be because Africa is getting it right. The West is closer to comfort and security. Africa is closer to danger and risk. But who is closer to Jesus?

Let us pray. Suffering God, be close today to all who carry your cross, in body, mind, or spirit. Raise up in Africa wells of hope that proclaim what you can do and reflect the wonder of your grace. Teach us what to work for, where to look for your revealing, and when to know we are face to face with you. Amen.