

**Sermon: St Andrew's, Corbridge: The Feast of the Epiphany, 6 January 2019**

Texts: Isaiah 60. 1-6; Matthew 2.1-12; John 1.9

Title: The light which enlightens every human being

*May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

It has been a very good week for star gazers. China's Yutuz Rover landed on the dark side of the Moon, and NASA's New Horizon spacecraft sent images of Ultima Thule – the one that looks like a snowman - from the very edge of our solar system, and if you were in the right place, the past week has been good for meteor showers. Add to that NASA's InSight spacecraft which successfully landed on Mars in November, and the celestial bodies are indeed in the news.

And so today, on Epiphany, it seems right to consider the Star. What was the star of Bethlehem? There has been much speculation about what the Magi actually saw in today's gospel. Suggestions range from a comet to a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, or a nova or supernova, and indeed any of these is possible.

But I wonder. Is St Matthew saying something more profound? Not so much what is the star, but who is the star?

I have always been intrigued by a statement in the glorious prologue to St John's Gospel which we read at Christmas; the statement is – 'The true light, which enlightens every human being, was coming into the world' (John 1.9).

And it is that particular claim, that the eternal Word of God, whom we call the second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, *enlightens every human being*. I wonder what you make of that? I puzzle about it. How does Jesus enlighten everyone?

Of course, the verb *enlighten* can have more than one meaning. It could mean a kind of inner, universal illumination, common to all humanity. That might be human wisdom or goodness or some grasp of eternal truth. Or, it could mean that this divine light illuminates in the sense of *shines light upon* all humanity. I have a sense that John means the latter; after all, as his Gospel unfolds, many people fail to recognise Jesus as the Light of the world; they choose not enlightenment but darkness; they allow themselves to be motivated by evil, lies and sin. Remember, when Judas Iscariot left the Upper Room, it was *night*.

So I sense that the prologue is making a statement of objective reality. There is indeed a Light that shines on every human being without exception; a Light that is

true, divine, eternal; a Light that is necessary for a true knowledge of God. That Light came into the world at Christmas.

And it is this universal objectivity of the one true Light that Matthew's star represents. It is a remarkable irony that the ones who recognised the coming of this Light into the world were not God's people, the Jews, symbolised by Jerusalem and that old bruiser King Herod, but what John Milton calls 'star-led wizards' from the east. They were probably astronomers and astrologers, who believed that the heavens themselves witnessed to significant events here on earth. Whatever they saw, Matthew's star was for them a means of divine light, divine revelation, which they were able somehow to recognise, and which led them on a journey until they beheld the Word made flesh. The Magi, who studied the heavens, saw what the Biblical scholars of Jerusalem, whom Herod summoned, could not see. They responded to that Light which enlightens every one, that light which shines upon everyone. Of course, Matthew himself knew passages like our magnificent first reading from Isaiah 60:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come;  
the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
The Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you.  
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to your dawning brightness.*

Note the prominence of *risen, arise*. 'We have seen *his* star at its *rising*. Here is a new, glorious light that will attract nations and even monarchs. So the nations come to Jesus; the Scripture is fulfilled.

So the question is, not what is the star but who is the star? The star for Matthew is a kind of sacrament of Jesus and his over-shadowing glory. 'We have seen *his* star at its rising and have come to pay *him* homage'. This reminds us that if this Light enlightens every human being, shines upon every human being, then Jesus is for the *whole* world. He is not simply for Christians, the Church, the Jews, the religious, but for everyone. The nature he assumed was not simply for the benefit of part of humanity, but for the whole of humanity in every generation. The death that he died was not some kind of limited atonement, but was for the sins of the whole world. The risen body of Easter was not simply in order to raise up a few, but to raise up the great harvest of the dead, of whom Christ is the first-fruits.

I must confess that I, and I suspect we, struggle with the mystery as to why some human beings recognise and embrace this great Light, while others seem indifferent or even hostile to it.

But I have two convictions. The first is that the Magi did perceive his light and at the end of a very long journey and in their own way and with their own gifts they worshipped him. And that very journey is symbolic of that great biblical hope that one day, at the end of all human journeying, people will come not simply from the east, but from the north and south and west; that earthly powers, kings, potentates, political, philosophical and ideological systems, even 'star-led wizards', will come and find Jerusalem's true King, and bow down and worship him and confess that he is Lord of all. And the second conviction is that as a Church, we must pour our energies and imaginations into witnessing to this Light that has enlightened us and that still shines upon the whole human race. Epiphany reminds us that Jesus is for everyone, without exception.

For me, the symbol of the open doors of this Church, from 'the rising of the sun to its setting', every day, 365 days a year, is an out-working of the meaning of the Epiphany. For we seek to welcome all who come in, from whatever nation or faith, from whatever culture or creed, from whatever social status, from shepherd to king. For here in this place, perhaps people perceive and recognise the Light a little more clearly; here we have the opportunity; no, the joy, of interpreting its meaning, of pointing to Jesus Christ himself, for the true Light, that enlightens every human being, *has* come into the world. And as I said at the Christmas Tree Festival, I still survey the night sky and look for the brightest star – for that star is Jesus. In 2019, our calling as a Church is to worship and to witness to him. Jesus is the Star.