**THE EPIPHANY Matthew 2:1-12**

Today – January the 4th – is the traditional celebration in the Christian Church of a festival we call ‘The Epiphany.’

Epiphany is not a word that we hear all that often, so a person could be forgiven for not knowing exactly what it means. When the word is used, it has come to mean a revelation of some kind, a sudden insight or understanding that helps us get more of a handle on something. When I was doing maths at school, I’d occasionally struggle with something and I’d need the teacher to explain it to me again. Then I’d say, “Oh I get it” – and then I’d be right. I’d have a mathematical epiphany.

 So where does the term come from? It comes from the story we read in today’s Gospel, though in modern usage, the meaning of the word has broadened somewhat.

Initially, the Epiphany referred to a single event - the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. The Magi weren’t necessarily kings, although they could have been. They were obviously learned men – they knew their astronomy, and they were most certainly dignitaries from their respective countries. Scholars believe this visit took place when Jesus was perhaps around the age of eighteen months or so, when the star appeared in the East, leading the Magi to find and worship the infant Jesus. Which means, incidentally, that all the Nativity scenes and Christmas cards with the Magi visiting the baby Jesus at the stable are not technically correct – but it’s not a terribly significant detail, so in popular thought, the ‘three kings’ remain part of the gathering at the stable.

There are three epiphanies I want to look briefly at this morning.

1. The epiphany that began it all – the star that revealed the Christ Child to the Magi
2. The epiphany that was Paul’s
3. The epiphany that is ours

**The epiphany of the Magi**

We all know the carol, don’t we? We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts, we traverse afar; field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star….

Have you ever wondered why that all happened? Was it just an amazing light show, or was there something deeper behind that event? The star in the east wasn’t just fireworks! Both the star and the people the star appeared to are deeply significant:

The star – an object of light and beauty and splendour – has been seen throughout Christian history as representing the light of Christ, shining into this dark world.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah today, we read, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” The light, who is Jesus, was not just for the Jews – he was a light for **all** the nations. He was for England, and the USA, and Russia and China and Australia – all of them!

And the kings/wise men themselves were significant. They were significant because they were not Jewish. The star revealed the glory of Jesus to these oriental dignitaries who were Gentiles. Heathens. As the early church came to understand that Jesus came to save all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, and pondered these events in retrospect, I imagine it would have been an ‘epiphany’ all over again as they realised what God was saying thought this event.

And so it is that the church celebrates the Epiphany every year as an important festival in the Christian calendar.

**Then we have Paul’s epiphany**

Paul was blessed to have an epiphany on two levels. One was deeply personal, and the other sent him out into the unknown.

I’m sure you remember Paul’s story: Paul, the most Jewish of all Jews, Pharisee par excellence and persecutor of the Church – was on his way to sort out these heretics who called themselves Christians – when he was blinded by the most incredible light! It knocked him off his horse. It rendered him almost senseless. Note the similarity? - The light, the glory of God, being revealed to humanity, this time to the person of Paul.

In this instance, God was sorting Paul out. First of all, Jesus revealed himself to Paul, so Paul would believe and be saved. Secondly, Jesus revealed himself to Paul, so that Paul could take the message of God’s love to the Gentiles, and share with them the message of salvation.

In our New Testament reading today from Ephesians Paul shares where he is coming from. He has previously told them of his experience on the road to Damascus, and he says, “…you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s special calling was to take the message of the Gospel – that Jesus died and rose again to save us and unite us with God – and offer it to non-Jews. I don’t think we have any idea how hard this would have been for the Jews to understand. Their whole history with God – *thousands* of years- told them they were special to God. They’d come to believe, incorrectly, that God wasn’t interested in the Gentiles. (In fact God had *always* been interested in the Gentiles. Israel’s brief had been to be as priests to the nations around them, to lead them to God, but it never happened.)

So here they were, entrenched in the belief that they were special, and God hated everyone else, and they had to open their minds to this concept that Jesus died for the Gentiles as well. Paul’s call was a tough call. But he was obedient, as were the other apostles and consequently, the Christian faith spread to the entire known world.

With both the Magi, and Paul, the epiphanies they experienced were not for themselves alone. When God reveals himself to any of us, I don’t believe for a moment that it is just for ourselves. We are called to be a light to the world. Remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:14? "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

**What is our epiphany?** – We may think that epiphanies are only for the special people God calls; that we are not in the same league as the Magi or Paul. But think for a moment - we’re here today, worshipping as a Christian. How did that happen? Was it our doing or was it God’s? Remember that Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”

So that means if we call ourselves Christians, we have had an epiphany of our own. We can only come to Jesus as the Holy Spirit reveals him to us; as he opens our eyes and grants us understanding.

This means that we also have a responsibility – as did the Magi and as did Paul – to share our epiphany with others; to let our light shine.

Of course I don’t mean that we need to share with others every last intimate detail that God communicates to us. Sometimes when God speaks to us, what he reveals to us is for our ears only. But when he shows *himself* to us – when he grants us an understanding of who he is and why he came – we need to communicate that. When he reveals something of his nature to us – we need to share that. When we are privileged to experience his love, his compassion, or like Paul, catch a glimpse of his glory – we need to pass that on.

 If we are Christians, we will all have a story of God revealing himself to us. For some of us that story will have unfolded over decades. For others, we may have had a dramatic encounter with God that we can put a time and date to, and it has unfolded from there – but we will all have a story.

If you’re not sure what your story is, you could begin by asking yourself questions such as, “What’s my earliest memory of God?” “What were my first prayers about?” “Is there an answer to prayer that stands out for me?” “When did I first begin to learn more about God?” “What makes God real for me?”

If we can begin to articulate answers to questions like this – writing it down helps - our story will begin to take shape, and then we may just find ourselves sharing it as we would any good news story!

As we move into 2015, let’s *pray* that God will reveal himself to us more and more – to grant us ongoing epiphanies if you like – so that our faith will be kindled, and our church enlivened.

Let me close, using the prayer of Paul for the Ephesians:

*God of our Lord Jesus Christ, our glorious Father, please grant us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know you better. We pray also that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which you have called us, the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints, and your incomparably great power for us who believe.* ***Amen***

