

## Bennochy church 6th January 2019

Did you notice what I did? Did you notice, that even though Christmas has passed, we still sang a Christmas carol, 'As *with gladness men of old*'. You might be thinking, has the story not finished? Is that not old news? Should we not be moving on to the next chapter of the story?

Traditionally, the story of the arrival of the Magi, is not actually celebrated at Christmas at all, but on what is called Epiphany. Little celebrated in the Church of Scotland. 12 days after Christmas. The 6th of January. In fact, today. This is Epiphany, The end of the Christmas season.

The Church began celebrating Epiphany in about the 4th century where it was, and still is, associated with the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. What has happened today, is that Christmas and Epiphany have become joined together into the one story. In our nativity scenes, the Magi join with the shepherds. They come as a crowd, to visit Jesus.

Epiphany is defined as a moment of sudden and great revelation, where God revealed himself to the world through the incarnation of Jesus... for a purpose. This idea of, God 'pitching his tent' in the world... for a reason. It is the part of the story we find in Matthew 2, and we know it so well. The Magi followed the star and offered the Christ child, gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Personally I don't think the order of the events around the birth of Jesus matter all that much. The early church were simply trying to order the events of the Christian year, into a pattern for the church to follow, and celebrate. So the Magi travel to Bethlehem after the visit of the shepherds. Well, so what?

What is much more interesting and intriguing is the idea that Paul raises in his letter to the church at Ephesus.

Here are Paul's words, "*I got the inside story on this from God himself, as I just wrote you in brief. As you read over what I have written to you, you'll be able to see for yourselves into the mystery of Christ. None of our ancestors understood this. Only in our time has it been made clear by God's Spirit through his holy apostles and prophets of this new order. The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.*" (Message translation, v3-6)

In other words, the revelations, the Epiphanies of history, have all hidden God's secret? Now, you might be saying, well what happened at Christmas is obvious, the answer to what God was up to, was seen in Jesus; but to 1st century Jewish Christians, this work of God was far from clear. To them, there was only one people of God, and throughout their history, they did not share God's secret. "Light to the nations". Not for them!

For Paul, God has been hidden in the midst of his revelations. But hidden in plain sight. Obvious, if you want to see him. That's what scripture tells us, and although Paul never mentions the birth stories, we must assume, that the birth of this child in Bethlehem, was not recognised as the event we know it to be. It was another hidden epiphany.

From that thought, Paul moves on to say to the Christian church, the secret is now out. It can no longer be hidden. The prophets spoke of it, but the message was ignored. Now the spirit speaks and reveals God's true intention. What is this secret? We are to shout it to the world; admittedly there are not many people listening, but in Jesus' day, it would have been talked about, if at all, in whispered tones, with surprise and maybe with some anger. The gospel, the secret message of God, is for all. That is what the Magi represent. Here are Gentiles, bringing their gifts to Jesus.

No reaction. You are not up in arms. You are not wearing your yellow vests and taking to the streets in protest. No expression of horror. You are not shouting me down. You are not straight on the phone, text or social media, wondering if this is true or what it means. But to those in Ephesus and for many others, this idea that Gentiles now shared the one body, the church, and were promised the same message of hope by God, now that, is what you call an epiphany!

Here's Chuck to tell us more. (Use epiphany video).

The twelve days of Christmas, that end today, are all about gifts. A list of increasingly elaborate gifts. On this 12th day, we are reminded of the greatest gift, and not only that, it is a gift for all. For centuries it was a gift kept hidden from the world. Now it has been revealed.

A gift of peace offered to a broken world. A gift of hope, to people in despair. A gift of love and forgiveness, for the vulnerable, the marginalised and the excluded. A gift of justice to the oppressed. We are all these people. The gift offered in the Christ child, is given to us. He is, our Immanuel. He is, 'God with us'.

There is now no secret. It has been revealed. Today, we celebrate the Epiphany of God. Amen.