

A friend of mine, Kate McIlhagga, who herself sadly died too young, wrote a beautiful prayer poem about Epiphany.

Epiphany is a jewel.
Multi-faceted
Flashing colour and light.
Epiphany embraces
The nations of the world
Kneeling on a bare floor
Before a child.
Epiphany shows
a man
kneeling in the waters of baptism.
Epiphany reveals
The best is kept for last,
As water becomes wine
At the wedding feast.

O Holy One
To whom was given
The gifts of power and prayer,
The gift of suffering;
Help us to use
These same gifts
In your way
And in your name
(Kate McIlhagga)

I cherish Kate's description of Epiphany as a 'Jewel'. The very word 'Epiphany' means something like 'shining' or 'revealing', and it speaks to me of God's glory, God's visible presence, God shining or revealing himself in the most unexpected ways, ways that shine through human grief and sorrow and suffering, as well as human joy, indeed that sometimes we cannot quite separate out the two. That is probably a message it is good to remember in these strange and sad days in Switzerland.

As Kate's prayer suggests, (and as the Eucharistic prayer will recall) we often now see this season of Epiphany as beginning with the visit of the wise men, but also including Jesus' baptism and celebration of the wedding at Cana. Epiphany's jewel shines in and through each of them. It is the weeks when we are invited to begin to ask ourselves what does the message of Christmas, 'Emmanuel', 'God with us' mean in our world today. Howard Thurman, a great African-American theologian who lived in the first three quarters of the 20th century, spoke of the importance of doing 'the work of Christmas'

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

Today is the 10th day of Christmas, so perhaps we are celebrating Epiphany, Twelfth Night, a couple of days early. But it is good, perhaps particularly this year, to start thinking about this 'work of Christmas'. When Alan and I chose the hymns for today's services we didn't want to opt for songs that just retold parts of the Christmas story. We have selected ones whose words encourage us to rejoice that we have become part of the story ourselves. So courtesy of the carol 'As with gladness men of old' we will recall that 'All our costliest treasures bring, Christ, to thee our heavenly King'. 'O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness' is probably my own personal favourite Epiphanytide song, and we will be singing that with its beautiful words of assurance to, and pledge from, us:

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldest reckon as thine:
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

In fact the Gospel account of the wise men that we have just read makes it clear that the birth of Jesus doesn't and can't just leave us with them kneeling to present gifts at the manger. It forces us to explore some very uncomfortable questions, some as relevant today as they were in the time of Jesus. Those words which King Herod speaks to the wise men, the only direct words he speaks in the Gospel text, are the most stunning

example of double-speak in the whole of scripture, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word that I may also go and pay him homage.’ Double-speak is however a way of talking which is sadly not confined to kings or political leaders of 2000 years ago.

Indeed the biblical story forces us to address profound questions about the nature of power, of kings and kingship. There are the three wise men, whom Christian tradition, drawing from the Old Testament reading we have used today have often seen as being kings themselves. Tradition also has them buried in mighty Cologne Cathedral, and between them representing the three known continents of the New Testament era, Europe, Asia and Africa. There is ‘King Herod’ – introduced as such in the first line of the Gospel reading, who had been granted his role as ruler of the country by the Roman Empire as a reward for the utter brutality with which he had put down a revolt some decades earlier by the Jews against Roman rule. It is telling – and powerful – how Herod and his actions are painted in colours that deliberately remind us of that the Egyptian Pharaoh had behaved in a similar way towards the Israelites in Egypt more than a millennium earlier. Like that Egyptian Pharaoh Herod now tried to ruthlessly exterminate all the male infants whom he saw as a threat to his power. Ultimately he was as unsuccessful as Pharaoh had been earlier. It is of course intriguing and ironic that it should be Egypt, that land from which Jesus’ far distant ancestors has escaped at the time of the Exodus, which should be the country that would now provide safe refuge for him and his family from King Herod’s malice. And yet of course there is also that alternative very different model of kingship, represented by the one whom the wise men eventually discover not in a Jerusalem palace but in a Bethlehem outhouse. ‘Where is he who is born king of the Jews?’ The gifts they offer are symbolic: gold representing royal power, incense reminding us that in biblical history kings often had a priestly role, and myrrh, the most sombre gift of all, associated with rituals of funeral. In the ancient Mediterranean world one of the role of kings was that they might be expected to suffer and die on behalf of their people: there are hints of this even in the Old Testament, and from the time of his birth we discover that such suffering is inherent in the model of kingship that Jesus offers. Such a model for kings would of course have been anathema to Herod; it is also I suspect anathema to several figures who rule powerfully in our world today, whatever precise title they may hold. They may tout their Christian credentials, but they have not even begun to comprehend that question Jesus posed to his disciples on the road to Emmaus: did you not know that God’s anointed one must suffer?

Here in Geneva, this so gracious city, which history has bequeathed a significant role in international politics and peace-building, part of the ‘work of Christmas’ is surely to continue to work for a just and ethical international order which respects the dignity of all human beings – even though that vision may have been made more difficult to achieve by tyrants of today. We deeply need the inspiration that the Christmas story

offers to pledge ourselves to continue to struggle for ‘Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness.’ Over the next few months of 2026 there will be quite a lot of the ‘work of Christmas’ to continue.

I find my own life curiously divided in two at the moment. It is a joy and a privilege still to spend quite a lot of time still here in Geneva and to be associated with this community of Holy Trinity, diversity in unity. As a prayer we have sometimes used here in the past puts it

‘we thank you that you have set us in this place,
blessed by the beauty of your creation,
where history witnesses to longing for freedom, justice and peace.’

In Dorset, though, where I now live more of the time the preoccupations of life feel rather different. The current topic dominating the local social media outlets in our part of Dorset is the large number of parcels that have been misdelivered by various delivery firms, often, though not exclusively, Evri. Regularly a frustrated local resident puts on a picture on our ‘Nextdoor’ social media group of a front door step with their parcel on it, taken and sent to them by the delivery person. The only problem is that it is not their own front door, and they don’t know whose it is. There’s now a wonderful picture on line of an Evri vehicle delivering parcels on the moon, having got a bit lost somewhere en route. Some wit has commented, ‘To be fair, astronomically speaking that is “we left your parcel next door”’. I tell myself from time to time that if this is the main thing we have to worry about in rural Dorset we are probably a very privileged part of the population, compared with the great majority of the world, or even of Britain. It recently occurred to me, however, that one way of reflecting on Matthew’s story of the wisemen is to think of them initially attempting to mis-deliver those gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, to the wrong king, and in the wrong city. Or perhaps one might put it that they discovered that neither king nor city were quite what or where they expected, and what they thought would be the right person and place turned out wrong but led them on to an eventual new discovery which had a rightness beyond their – and our - imagining.. Malcolm Guite caught this in his lovely Christmas sonnet.

Christmas sets the centre on the edge;
The edge of town, the outhouse of the inn,
The fringe of empire, far from privilege
And power, on the edge and outer spin
Of turning worlds, a margin of small stars
That edge a galaxy itself light years

From some unguessed at cosmic origin.

Christmas sets the centre at the edge.

And from this day our world is re-aligned

A tiny seed unfolding in the womb

Becomes the source from which we all unfold

And flower into being. We are healed,

The end begins, the tomb becomes a womb,

For now in him all things are re-aligned.

What is the 'work of Christmas' for each of us this year?