

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 2nd January 2022
Epiphany Sunday

We are of the world

There is a temptation to view the Christmas story through rose tinted glasses. A lovely, rural scene of a mother and child, lovingly looked over by a slightly distant father figure, visited either by rural labourers or richly presented sages. Yet there is a grittiness to this story. The unmarried nature of the mother is sometimes alluded to, though this is in the context of a modern western understanding of relationships. Often the fact that the child is born in a stable where animals were housed or the humble nature of the shepherds and their ripe character has been reflected on to emphasis the unassuming beginnings of the story of salvation.

When we arrive at New Year, the Feast of the Epiphany and the conclusion of the Christmas season, the focus of our story is draw to the high status of the next set of visitors and the sumptuous offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh. A colourful, soft and enjoyable story of the beginnings of a young family who fortunately escape the clutches of an evil tyrant through the ministrations of the angels who appear in dreams to the key players.

Upon this story the Christian faith has built its winter festival. From this story over time communities and families have draw a basis for celebration and coming together. We are given a period when the cares of life, the universe and everything can be left behind. We put out the tinsel and roast the turkey, gather friends and family around a common table and share in festivities.

As the year's festivities fade, the story we are offered draws us back into a reality that cannot be ignored. These sages that are said to find their way to the crib draw in for us the reality and harshness of the world that crashes in on the life of this child. In their gifts, their actions and the consequences of their actions; the raw cruelty of life in first century Roman Empire is brought home.

The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh offer to us an understanding of the nature and ministry of Jesus. Gold signifying Jesus' kingship of creation.

Frankincense the Christ's divine nature in the midst of our humanity. Myrrh, the death that will come, not at the hands of nature but of society, as part of the salvation story that will proclaim the love of God for everyone. Already we cannot escape the realities of existence in that life and death come together as part of the journey of faith.

The sages, in their journey make a mistake that will cost lives. Their assumption that a king would be born in a palace. This encounter with the political powers of the time not only threatens the life of the child but will result in the massacre of innocents. Many will lose their lives, as millions have done both before and long after, because of greed, fear, injustice and the abuse of power. The journey of the magi, wittingly or unwittingly, draws into the story of Jesus an understanding in the world of the cheapness of humanity in the eyes of power; that secrecy, scheming, lies and cheating are part of the broken human condition.

For the story of Jesus to have any meaning these elements of human existence need to be included to draw us away from a utopian understanding of the life of faith, to one that sees faith as an integral part of existence in the real world. We are offered a very real understanding of the harshness of life and the power of God. That God, in his Son, no longer exists on some distant plane but is an integral part of our own story of life and death.

It is a misunderstanding to believe that the life of faith is to live separately from the world. The story of Jesus may in some ways seem alien to our own. He was born into a different world from that which we might experience today. Yet the message is the same. As we suffer so Christ suffers with us. In grief, in brokenness we are no longer left alone to struggle. In the manger and on the cross our existence is given a new understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God. Now we are made whole in this new relationship if we are prepared to let Christ into our lives. We can do this because of the brutality and reality of the life of Jesus that begins humbly and ends cruelly. Today's story then is one of engaging the story of salvation with the reality of creation and the completion of the universe. That our faith is not an other-worldly existence but is one grounded in the reality of human existence. That Jesus Christ walks with us today, yesterday and for ever and we will never walk alone again.