

Sermon for Epiphany Sunday 8th January 2017

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I have always been very fond of the writer Mark Twain, not just for his wonderful stories of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn but for what one might call his “take on life” captured in some of his sayings. A favourite one has been very much in my mind this week as I have been encouraged by every newspaper article and TV advert to get fit for 2017. Mark Twain when pressed to begin any new activity gave this warning: “Mistrust any enterprise that requires the purchase on new clothes”. Very sound advice. I shall not therefore be spending £90 on a pair of neon Sweaty Betty leggings (you’ll be grateful to learn) but seeking a fitness programme that I already have a wardrobe suitable for – slippers probably.

But just as the media are ripping down the tinsel and urging dry Januarys and rough oatcakes the church is still in full festival mode and mood. The Feast of the Epiphany – the Twelfth Day and Night of Christmas the 6th January was traditionally a time of great revelry and treats. The word Epiphany means “showing” and the feast celebrates the revealing of the infant Jesus to the wisemen or kings who sought him by following the star from its rising in the east. Showing, starlight, rejoicing and a time of gifts. Gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh yes, but truly God’s gift of himself to the world. Jesus born as Jew but shown to and shared with the whole world. A feast indeed!

But whether we are fasting or feasting this Epiphany some questions are the same. What are we looking for this New Year and where are we looking? Those of us exercising and dieting are looking perhaps for a new and healthy stream-lined us for 2017. Those of us feasting are looking for things to keep us cheerful in the still long winter months ahead. Epiphany is full of looking. We have heard it in all our readings this morning.

In our glorious reading from the prophet Isaiah comes the instruction to “Lift up your eyes and look around”. For then we shall see and be radiant. We shall shine with the light we seek. St Paul is encouraged by what he has seen – the living Christ on the road to Damascus – to share what he has seen with the whole world. And St Matthew tells story of the coming of the wisemen to the place where the star finally reveals.

Where are we looking? It may be that we need to scan the heavens for a sign. To look far beyond where we are today for what tomorrow holds. But

more likely and more painfully we shall need to look rather closer to home - to where we are now. Where Sunday 8th January at half past ten finds us.

A lovely Jewish story captures something of this. It concerns a young married couple who are given on their wedding day a rather plain vase by their rabbi who tells them it is their greatest treasure. The couple faithfully and carefully dust the vase but never take very much notice of it. The couple grow distant from each other and cease to speak very much about their own hopes and dreams until one day the husband shares his sadness that life has not brought them all they had hoped and in a gesture of frustration sweeps the vase that has come to stand for their marriage from its shelf to the floor where it shatters to pieces. With a gasp the wife kneels down and tries to retrieve them, then gasping again with her eyes full of shining tears she puts into her husband's hands what she has found. A large and perfect diamond. It has been there all the time and as they embrace and find each other again they recognise that only in the breaking could come the showing.

Only in the breaking comes the showing. There are things in our lives that we have ceased to examine too closely. Things we think we know, things we don't want to know. Things hidden too deep and too long. Things about ourselves that we believe to be incapable of change.

Epiphany challenges us to break in. To take a proper look at where we are and to see in it not familiar habits and failings but the joy and peace and hope that they have always contained but that we have stopped being able or have never been able to see. The relationships that feel jaded. The talents and the years we feel we have wasted. Break them open and be prepared to find in amongst the sharp splinters shining treasure. We do not need new clothes, new people, new places - new "mes" - in 2017 but eyes to see what is new and beautiful in the old ones. Perhaps it is our relationship with God himself that we need to stop dusting around but break into and find ourselves in him. Whatever we need to look at anew, we do not do this in our own strength, but in the company of the one Isaiah foretold; the one St Paul and the wisemen found, and the one who walks with us today. The one who wants to take from us our broken pieces and to give us starlight in our eyes and diamonds in our hands.

Amen