

Epiphany

St. Brandon's

Isaiah 60:1-6; Eph. 3:1-12; Matt. 2:1-12

5th January 2020

How are you feeling? The start of a New Year, and the start of a new decade. And with that you might be expecting that I will have something to say about the future. And with Brexit continuing to be top of the political agenda for us at least during 2020, and all the implications for our economy including trade deals with other nations, or not; the possible impact on the NHS; our international relations more generally, and so on and on, there is plenty for concern here, and plenty for prayer and action. Then, of course, there's climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals more broadly, and certainly the overriding issue is whether by 2030 we have got the measure of climate change or whether it is running away from us, and taking us into a very unstable future not just environmentally but also socially and politically. Again, there is plenty for concern here, isn't there, and plenty for prayer and action. But I don't want to focus particularly on either of these this morning. In any case, you've probably read enough in the papers, or seen enough on TV, or gleaned enough on the internet, to understand all this – though I hope that for all of us these, and probably other issues besides, will be a major focus for our prayers and action in the coming year and decade.

On the other hand, and turning from 'the world' to 'faith' matters, today is of course Epiphany, the beginning of the season when we remember the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, i.e. to those of us who are not Jews. And this universalising of Christianity to everyone is, of course, revealed particularly in the journey of the magi from the East. The prophecy in our OT reading pictures this as the Lord and His glory appearing over the people of Israel – much like the star which appeared in our gospel reading. And this revealing of God and His glory has the effect of drawing the nations to this light – "lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you" – epitomised again by the magi in our gospel reading, of course. So Epiphany, the revealing of the mystery of Christ as St Paul put it in our NT reading, speaks to us of God's universal reign, of kings and nations being drawn to this staggering brightness. And so it speaks to us of God even now, and more particularly in the fullness of time, establishing His kingdom with all peoples as "members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel" as Paul puts it. And that puts Brexit and trade deals, and even climate change, in perspective. Those issues may well presage huge changes and challenges, but they are not the last word. Only the Word who became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, only that Word will have the last word.

But I don't want to focus particularly on that either this morning! So what do I want to focus on? Well, I asked you a brief question right at the beginning – so brief, and I moved on so quickly, that you probably didn't even register it. But the question was this: How are you feeling? And if you heard it, or as you hear it now, you know that it's typically a non-question, sort of directed at physical health, but that doesn't really expect an answer, or perhaps an equally perfunctory – "I'm well, thanks" or, as seems to be the way nowadays, "I'm good" (though this seems to offer more of an opinion on our moral status than a factual statement on our health!) But take it this morning as a genuine question. How are you feeling? And not just, or even mainly physically, but how are you feeling emotionally? And I was drawn to this question by our readings this morning, where quite strong and positive emotions are expressed.

In our OT reading, as well as kings and nations being drawn to God and His glory, so are sons and daughters: "your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms." And then it continues, "Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice ..." Just think back a moment to the last time your heart thrilled and rejoiced! And in our gospel reading, those surly old magi ("A hard time we had of it" if T.S.Eliot is to be believed), when they saw that the star had stopped over

the place where the child was, “they were overwhelmed with joy.” Just think back a moment to the last time you were overwhelmed with joy! And for the magi that emotion, of course, led them to kneel down and pay homage to the Christ child. Just think back to the last time you were so overcome with godly emotion, if you like, that you could do no other than worship.

Even Paul in our NT reading, while talking mainly of the mystery of Christ and, in effect, the ‘head’ knowledge of God’s salvation in Christ, speaks of this as “news of the boundless riches of Christ” in whom “we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.” Just think back a moment to the last time you entered into the presence of God with boldness and confidence!

So, I think there’s some encouragement here to take our emotions seriously, and to express them appropriately. This is an important part of our inward life with God. You may not have noticed, but our first two hymns this morning helped with that: “As with *gladness* men of old did the guiding star behold, as with *joy* they hailed its light … as with *joyful* steps they sped … so may we with *holy joy* … all our costliest treasures bring, Christ to thee, our heav’nly King.” And in ‘Brightest and best’, “Say, shall we yield him in *costly devotion* [well yes, but] … richer by far is *the heart’s adoration* …” Here are some powerful and positive emotions being given expression.

This is not, of course, to say that all our emotions are positive. We are also likely to have emotions of anger, fear, depression, resentment and so on. But there’s no reason, of course, why we shouldn’t also take these emotions seriously and express them to God appropriately. The psalms are often good places to go to see that, and I was hoping this morning’s psalm would be an example – but not so! So I just opened the psalter and almost the first psalm I came across was Psalm 142 which begins: “With my voice I cry to the Lord; with my voice I make supplication to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.” Think back a moment to the last time you poured out your complaint(s) before God and told Him all your trouble.

So I want to encourage us at the start of this New Year and new decade – and, as usual, I’m speaking first to myself – to take seriously and express appropriately our emotions before God. This might even be a resolution! And you might like to think of it in terms of ‘Journey Inward, Journey Outward’, a helpful phrase that’s been coined to express the idea that our journey through life has two components. There’s the outward journey of finding our place in the world, which will include responding to Brexit and climate change, and so on. And then there’s the inward journey of the soul, and finding our place in relation to God. And it’s an important part of that inward journey that we bring in our emotions, that we come to God with all the joy and worship and adoration and boldness and confidence, and anger and fear and depression and complaints and trouble that we have. It’s an important part of our inward journey that we do that as honestly as we can before God.

And the inward journey and the outward journey are, of course, related – it’s from our outward journey that we bring to God all the ‘stuff’ that’s going on in our lives including our emotional reaction to them; it’s through the inward journey that we seek to work those through with God, and perhaps seek and find the resourcing that only He can provide to face our outward journey and know how we should act and respond to all that’s going on in that.

So, how are you feeling?

Amen