

A Mystery Revealed

Sermon preached by Neil Barker on Epiphany Sunday 2 Jan 2022

Ephesians 3.1-12: The Mystery of the Gospel is proclaimed

3 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you,³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power.⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2.1-12: The Visit of the Wise Men

² In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

EPIPHANY & NEW YEAR – MYSTERY REVEALED

On this first Sunday of this New Year of 2022, we are celebrating the church's festival of Epiphany. Epiphany means revelation or manifestation. In our Matthew reading we read of the making known or revealing of Christ Jesus as a baby to the 'wise men', sometimes called 'magi'.

MYSTERY and REVELATION were key themes that were repeated three times in our short Ephesians reading. Mystery is used in the sense of something that has been hidden but is now revealed. The Gospel or Good News of Christ was hidden before Christ was born on earth. Revelation is needed because the Good News or Gospel of Jesus cannot be worked out by reason or logic alone from our experiences. The Good News of Jesus was revealed in the Jesus Christ – the incarnate son of God or 'God-man' - coming to earth as a baby. No one saw who Jesus was. As Paul writes the Good News of Christ Jesus is something that was revealed by the Spirit of God to him and the other apostles and prophets. And it is the Spirit who has to make known Christ to us today.

For the apostle Paul his experience of this MYSTERY REVEALED led to proclamation.

He wanted to make known this mystery, this gospel, this wonderful, good news for all people. If Christ has been revealed to us then we have our part to play in making Christ known with our own particular personalities, and in our own particular situations, and in our own particular way.

Matthew's gospel account does not give any practical details of what happened around the birth of Jesus – yes he recounts that Mary bore Joseph a son and they called him Jesus, but we hear of no local shepherds see the baby Jesus, no angels rejoicing at this great

happening. Instead, Matthew focuses on men who journey from the East who we assume were non-Jewish – Gentiles.

Right from the outset, although Matthew's gospel has many references to Old Testament Jewish texts pointing to the future Messiah which were fulfilled in the life of Jesus, he was stressing by this striking beginning that Gentiles will be drawn to this Messiah and that the Messiah will be revealed to them and that they will worship him.

As although we can't be sure where in the East the wise men travelled from most commentators are agreed the journey would have taken them months if not as long as 1-2 years. Why did the wise men make the journey from the East to Jerusalem? They had been given somehow a mysterious indication that a star was announcing the birth of a new king. We know that some revelation about God can come from his created world. The Psalmist writes 'The heavens declare the glory of God'. The wise men must have reasoned that this star with its meaning was given to them for a purpose – that they should go and find this king and pay homage to him. They exercised faith and commitment in making the journey. It had been revealed to them that he was the King of the Jews and they understood that the right response was going to be to pay homage or worship to him.

For the wise men their experience of a MYSTERY REVEALED led them to worship.

The wise men gave costly worship to Jesus expressed in their gifts expensive gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that this baby was not only an earthly King of the Jews of a nation but also and indeed a cosmic King of Kings but of the universe. As we journey into a New Year – are we ready to watch out for new signs, new possibilities, perhaps to take risks in order that might go deeper in our worship of the King of kings. Our worship can be expressed in the offering of our lives, flowing from our innermost

beings of all that we are. Christina Rossetti's poem captures this worship well at this time of year: What can I give him? / Poor as I am / If I were a shepherd / I would give a lamb. // If I were a wise man / I would do my part / But what I can I give him / Give him my heart

At the start of the new year, we may well be facing unknown situations, situations that may be perplexing and a mystery to us and we will be seeking some revelation or some insight to guide us. It is possible for us to be manipulated by others, to be mistreated by others and we have to try, with God's help, to be true to ourselves in order to win through. We will need understanding and wisdom to act in the way we know we should. We may need the support of others as we look to the Spirit of God to give light and direction to our spirits to live in a Christ-like way.

The MYSTERY REVEALED guides towards wisdom, understanding, hope.

We are on a journey of responding to the **revelation** that we have received, the revelation of Jesus that we find in the different gospel accounts, the unpacking and exploring of what that revelation might mean in different parts of the Gospel and the New Testament, and the background context to Christ that we find in the Old Testament which have listened to or read. Many of us read the Bible regularly on our own or with others and we are always working out or understanding what this revelation should mean for our lives – what impact it should have. May our understanding lead us to a deeper knowledge of Christ – understand and experience more of his love, his kindness, his holiness, his life-changing power, his transforming power in society.

In our Ephesians reading Paul has a large vision of the church and writes about the church making known the wisdom of God in its rich variety. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died on Boxing Day, and who Archbishop Justin Welby described as a man with enormous vision once said 'For Christians, who believe they are created in the image of

God, it is the Godhead, diversity in unity and the three-in-oneness of God, which we and all creation reflect.' Do we need a deeper understanding of the Church and our place in it? Earlier in Ephesians Paul writes 'and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' or as another translation has it 'you have been integrated together'. Can we grow in our appreciation of the rich variety that the church displays of the wisdom of God – as we meet with different Christians within our local church of St Nicholas Marston but also from other churches & traditions. This year will we gain a deeper knowledge of the church?

Will our experience of the REVEALED MYSTERY lead us into a deeper proclamation of Christ, a deeper understanding of Christ, a deeper knowledge of the church, a deeper worship of God?

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what different ways can we share Christ with those who we know?
2. In what deeper ways are we going to listening to God's revelation and support one another – so that we grow in our faith and overcome the challenges that we face? Join a home or Bible group, Join a group reading the Bible in a year, Join a prayer triplet or prayer group, Try a different daily Bible reading routine, Start reading a book which focuses on a Book in the Bible
3. In what challenging ways are we going to understand better the wisdom of God that is found in all its variety in the wider church? Join us for our Churches Together service in January, Explore resources in the Living in love and faith series of the church of England, Read a book about the church in another part of the world
4. In what heartfelt ways are we going to grow in how we worship God as individuals and also collectively as a church? Set us special days of quiet for reflection and worship, Join in one of the churches quiet days, Listen to some different Christian worship music. Attend a service that you do not usually attend.