

Epiphany (transferred) - Te Whakaaturanga

8 January 2023

Message – What does the gospel look like today?

Aim: What might we learn?

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts always be yours O God, Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The Feast of the Epiphany, Te Whakaaturanga, has its roots in the breadth of God's self-revelation in the gospels. Within the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the concepts of Epiphany and Theophany are interwoven; for early Christians Theophany was an alternative name for the feast of the Epiphany. It was the third most important feast after Easter and Christmas. It is at the heart of our understanding of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God with us.

Epiphany was a celebration of the revelation of God in Christ, focused on the Baptism of Christ and also including the shepherds, Magi, the return of the Holy Family from Egypt, and Christ's first miracle at the wedding in Cana. In our own church calendar, the alternative celebration for today is the Baptism of Christ. Though displaced by the Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ is nonetheless a part of our Epiphany season.

The wider concept of the Epiphany is retained by Eastern Orthodox Churches and, celebrating Epiphany on the same day as we do, it is the culmination of their Nativity season. In theory it is the culmination of our Christmastide but most of us just needed a good long rest after Christmas Day. Not a very

convincing twelve days of feasting and celebration. Rest and re-creation are important but perhaps we miss something by not adequately marking this as a festive season rather than day.

Gospel literally means good news; it brings deep joy to our lives. Sadly, that is not the impression most people have of Christians. Yet, when I see people here, in the cathedral, the first impression I get is that people are happy to be here. Our faith and church family are, for the most part, life giving and enhancing. Our Christmas services captured something of that joy and thankfulness for all that we have.

Different aspect of the revelation of God in Christ will speak to each of us at different times. Matthew's gospel was intended to speak to the audience he was writing for. It has a strong emphasis on seeing Christ as the fulfilment of prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures.

At times, to us, some of those fulfilments seem somewhat tenuous. The most extreme example is Matthew's claim that the prophets foretold that the Christ would be a Nazarene. There is no reference at all to Nazareth in the Hebrew Scriptures. Scholars best guess is that it is a play on words. Either it links Nazarene with Nazarite, those who were set aside for God, through fasting, not cutting their hair, and not touching the dead, which fits well with John the Baptist but less so with Christ. Or it links Nazareth with the Hebrew word for branch, which might have been apparent to Matthew's Hebrew audience, (Isa 11.1) "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a **Branch** will bear fruit." However, for most of us, the concerns of Matthew's Hebrew audience are not ours today.

Even without understanding this interpretation of the prophecies, the essence of Matthew's gospel remained for Matthew's gentile readers as it does for us today.

Christ is first revealed to foreigners who respond far more readily than those in Jerusalem, who claimed to be waiting for Christ. Christ challenges our notions of how God might appear in human form. Christ was called out of Egypt, a symbolic second calling of Israel from Egypt. Christ accepts the baptism of John the Baptist, a symbol of Christ's unity with our humanity. Yet Christ baptism is also marked as exceptional when the Spirit of God descended and a voice came from heaven "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." All of that, is just Matthew's presentation of the theophany. And, that is just the start of the good news.

It reveals to us that God has lived as one of us, that God fully understands our humanity, not in some abstract way, but experienced as we experience it. Not only does the image of God rest in us but, in some mysterious way, humanity has become a part of God. We are fully known by God and, despite what we may think of ourselves, God loves us, forgives us, and shows us a better way.

This is the good news that people need to hear today. The way in which that needs to be communicated changes from generation to generation though the message of love is surprisingly unchanging. Nonetheless, the way in which the gospel is best communicated today may be different in subtle and not so subtle ways than whatever convinced us to join this community.

Many people today can see that life needs to be lived differently but for a variety of reasons they don't see that different way of living in the church. How can we communicate that there is a different way, one that is life giving, one that gives to the world rather than consuming the earth?

The path of the Nazarene is not an easy path and the gospels are clear that not everyone will follow it. We should not be discouraged. Our responsibility is to use the time, talents, and treasures, we have wisely so that as many people as possible may be able to hear the gospel. Hearing the gospel is not just about literal hearing, it is about recognising the message as lived out in others. For some people words will be an essential part of this. They will need to find a reasoned way in.

For others, it will be the sense of who we are as a community and how our beliefs are reflected in our actions. We cannot talk of love and forgiveness and then fail to be loving and forgiving ourselves. It is indeed a difficult path.

We, as a community, communicate the gospel in a variety of ways. We welcome all people, we try to show love and grace towards people who are very different from ourselves. However, where St Paul proclaimed, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." We cannot as a community have the same kind of chameleon nature. For some our community will not be what they need at this point in their lives.

Even choosing to be an inclusive congregation means that some people will not feel that they can be a part of our community. That said, hopefully you are aware of the range of theological

views present here. That in itself is an expression of the gospel. We don't try to change people; we simply try to love and respect them. And, when that is done well, it is surprising how different we can be and still worship together.

Beyond this, our worship can't be all things to all people. We have a particular style. As Anglicans, our prayer books are a fundamental expression of who we are and this church chooses to give a particularly formal expression of that. It is perhaps a part of what allows us to be a diverse community.

We also have a wonderful mixture of the simple and the extravagant. Our said eucharist allow the liturgy to speak for itself. Our choral eucharists express the liturgy through music, song, and symbolic actions to give diverse ways of expressing the same message. Neither is better than the other. Both feed different people but both are rooted in liturgy that has been crafted to express the complex themes of the gospel in a way that is inclusive of diverse theologies. Much of it is simply drawn from the scriptures. We are at heart a people of the book, even if we understand the book in diverse ways.

This coming year, after the AGM, I will be inviting our vestry to an away day to consider our plans for how we express the gospel in this place at this time. This isn't about my vision, this is about our vision as the body of Christ, drawing together all our gifts and talents to be all that we can be.

May God gently direct us towards the light, and by the Holy Spirit guide us and transform us that we may shine more brightly with the light of Christ and Love of God for all in our community. Amen. Amen.

Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one things earthly and heavenly,
fill you with peace and goodwill
and make you partakers of the divine nature;
and the blessing ...

May the joy of the angels,
the eagerness of the shepherds,
the perseverance of the wise men,
the obedience of Joseph and Mary,
and the peace of the Christ-child
be yours this Christmas;
and the blessing of God almighty,
Our Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life
be with you always. **Amen**







2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] 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,^[b] 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^[c] 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^[d] my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] 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,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] 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.

In all of our actions, grand and small, may the light and love of God be seen, here and everywhere, now and in eternity.
Amen. Amen. Amen.