

Epiphany 2020

Isaiah 60:1-11; Eph.3:1-12; Matt.2:1-12

The History-Shaper; the Life-Definer

One thing most vicars do on a Sunday morning is check the news headlines one last time before heading out the door to church. Will something have happened that means you have to tear up the sermon and preach something entirely different? It would, of course, have to be something really big: not just the latest scandal or political controversy. The primary job of the preacher is to talk about the bible passages for the day and what they tell us about God: it has to be a spectacularly important bit of secular news for that primary focus to shift.

Thinking of it now, I'm not actually sure I can remember it happening. The invasion of Iraq was one time, perhaps, but we had known that was coming for a while. The tsunami on Boxing Day in 2004, which killed 230,000 people might have been another – the first reports were coming in early that Sunday morning, but I'm not quite sure now that any of us realised quite how big the disaster was at that stage. And now, though it didn't happen on a Sunday morning, there is the killing of an Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani.

Now maybe, we will get lucky. Maybe, in fifteen years time, we'll have forgotten who Soleimani was and what happened to him and why it mattered. Maybe, this killing will turn out to be just another passing moment. Maybe, if we get lucky. The odds are not great. Joe Biden's take seems the most accurate to me: we have just seen the tossing of a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox. No-one can tell just yet how big the explosion will be, and how difficult the subsequent fire – or fires – will be to put out. We can hope that the flames don't come too near our own lives, but we cannot be sure. This thing could be history-shaping and life-defining, even for us.

Well, what has all that to do with the lovely legend of three wise men, three kings, coming on their camels, guided by starlight, to lay their gifts before the baby in the manger? What has the real world of Trump and Khameni, bombs and missiles, to do with this soft-focus lovely world of the epiphany? Surely today is a day to ditch the sermon, and talk politics rather than Bible?

Well, as it happens, no. Because actually, what the story of epiphany is saying is exactly for a time like this. It is saying that even now, your attention should be here. Focused on this baby, on the man he became, on what happened to Him and who He is. *Here* is the history-shaper, the life-definer. Next to this, the presidents and the ayatollahs with all their guns and bombs are just flashy baubles, clanging cymbals, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing. They think are they are so important, and it is indeed so easy to get caught up in the swirl of their drama, the jostling of their egos – to think that what happens between them is the really important stuff of life. But epiphany says, no: put your focus here, on this baby.

How is the story saying that?

Well, the first thing to note is that the wise men are Gentiles, not Jews. It's as if Matthew puts into one simple story what St. Paul spent years arguing out: that the Bible's story was never just a Jewish story, but reached out of itself to embrace *all* people. The story of God and his people, of Abraham, Isaiah, Job and Jeremiah, priests and prophets and kings pours itself into this baby, into Jesus of Nazareth, and from Him springs out to reach everyone – you, me, Trump, Soleimani. He is the history-shaper, the life-definer, for all people, all places, all times. And the rest of Matthew's Gospel goes on to spell out exactly how that is so – how it is through Jesus' death on the cross and his rising from the dead that the whole human story comes to one glorious, joyful, *shared* end. The wicked, however powerful they are, will not bring this world down in flames, because Jesus Christ crucified and risen is bringing it to glory.

Secondly, the three visitors are not just any old Gentiles, but what the Bible calls *magi* – which means something like astronomer, scientist, philosopher, priest, guru, right hand man to government. Think Dominc Cummings and Rasputin and Brian Cox rolled into one. They are men of *power*: spiritual, intellectual, political *power* – and they are summoned by starlight to kneel before this baby. That’s one reason why later church tradition made the wise men *kings* – it doesn’t say they were in the Bible, but that’s the way the story points: power bows before this baby. And power that will not bow, incidentally, power like bad King Herod sitting plotting in his palace – such power will die. This baby brings judgement. Presidents and Ayatollahs take note.

And thirdly, it’s not just human power that bows. The magi were summoned by a star – by something, that is, which for most of human history most people have considered as not just a physical reality. Stars have been like gods. They have revealed mysteries, controlled destinies, they have been fit for worship – and yet even the stars, says Matthew, lead to this manger. Even they fall into line before this baby. It is not just the human story that finds its climax here: this is the one for whom the whole creation has been longing, and now hails.

Gentiles, powerful Gentiles, and stars proclaiming his glory: the epiphany story from start to finish is saying, put your attention here. This child, this Jesus, is what your life is about. He is the history-shaper, the life-definer. Next to him, Trump, Herod, Iranian generals They fade away. They’re nothing. The great ones are great no more: he has thrown them down from their seats and sent them empty away.

And it’s good that the Feast of the Epiphany coincides, pretty much, with our New Year. Because the most obvious question is: if that is true, what is our response? What is *your* response? If Jesus Christ is the history-shaper, the life-definer – of *your* history, *your* life – what does that actually look like? What difference does it make that the story of your life finds its point, its meaning, its destiny in Him? If that is true, for instance, would not knowing Him through serious, daily prayer become central to your life? If this is true, wouldn’t you have to strive in every way to put his teaching into practice – to forgive people, to share your wealth, to become humble, to look after the poor and weak? If this is true, then like the wise men, wouldn’t you have to bring your most precious gifts and lay them before his feet? Your time, your money, your talent, your love – all poured in love, service, allegiance. If all this is true, that’s what’s required.

If all this is true. But what if you're not yet sure that it is? Well then, your New Year resolution should be to become sure: to look steadily and deeply at the claims of Jesus Christ, and not to allow yourself to be distracted by everything else. Not by Trump and Iran, not by all the smaller dramas of our lives, by work, by entertainment, by whatever it is that makes you run around and avoid facing what epiphany says is the magnetic centre of our lives, the climax of everything, the point of everything: that baby in the manger, who He is and what He does. Stop and consider, and do not stop considering until you have decided: is it true? Is He who He says He is? The History Shaper. The Life Definer. Of your history, your life. And if he is, how will you respond? Make facing that decision your resolution for 2020.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus: History-Shaper, Life-Definer: reveal yourself afresh to each one of us. Fill this whole church with the vision of your glory. Surrounded by all the fears and furies of the world, create in us lives worthy of the destiny you call us to, the destiny you have won for us through your Cross and Resurrection. To you be praise and glory, forever and ever. Amen.