

Epiphany Sermon 2018

I promise you this sermon will get to the wise men and Epiphany, but it begins in a different time and place: early seventeenth century Columbia, and the busy port of Cartegna.

The slave trade is in full swing. Ship loads of slaves, kidnapped from Africa, are being hauled across the Atlantic and deposited at the Cartegna dockside – one of the two entry points for slaves across the whole Spanish Empire in Latin America.

The Spanish Empire is of course a Christian empire, and the slavers are Christian slavers. The slaves, on the whole, are not. Indeed, one of the arguments used to justify the trade is that at least said slaves are being freed from the pagan darkness of Africa, and being bought to Christian civilisation where they might hear the Gospel.

And that's why two Jesuit priests spent years in the most terrible conditions by the Cartegna dockside ministering to the slaves being bought off the boats – making sure there is plenty of cool, fresh water for them to drink, and baptising at the same time. Most of the church does not give a damn about the physical or spiritual condition of the slaves, but these men do. They're especially concerned about the sins that might have been committed on board the ships: men and women held in close captivity, in desperate circumstances – all sorts of sexual behaviour might have taken place. These poor slaves might have been driven to desperately wicked things: they stand in dire need of the good news of Jesus, of baptism, of forgiveness.

Then, of course, you can sell them to their new masters – to be exploited, whipped, and killed. At least their souls are washed clean. Jesus will be pleased.

And that, I'm afraid, is at what you might call the enlightened end of most Christian responses to the slave trade in the early seventeenth century. Most of the Church didn't care *at all* about the slaves. At least those two, however narrow their vision, cared for their souls.

This is one little story among many which shows what has gone wrong with the Church's Gospel that Jesus Christ is good news for all the world. If you were an African slave, you might find it difficult to appreciate that the Spanish Saviour was Good News for you. And if you're an educated twenty first century Western European who understands just a fraction of how terrible the Church has been, you are likely to be a little hesitant before declaring that what the rest of the world really needs is to become Christian.

And so, a great many Christians today have gone very quiet on converting other people – especially people of other faiths. After all, we can see that Sikhs and Jews and Muslims and people of pretty much all faiths, and none, are capable of leading good, meaningful, and apparently spiritually rich lives. Often, they look better, more meaningful and richer than our own. We could even have things to learn from them: outside the church we know it is *not* simply pagan darkness. And as for the idea that God who would send people to Hell simply because they weren't Christians: we find that just abhorrent.

So, conversion is no longer in fashion. Missionary work now tends to emphasise the humanitarian side of things – schools and hospitals rather than conversion. We try to develop friendship and dialogue with those of other faiths, not seeking to convert them. And many of those involved in such dialogue will tell you that if there's even a whiff of the desire to convert, the friendship dies. Dialogue must not be evangelism. The emphasis is instead on the different traditions learning from each other, helping each other to be bigger, better, deeper practitioners of our own faiths, all working together for the common good of the world. Christians shouldn't want Islam or Sikhism or the others to disappear – to convert - but to be the best version of themselves: pathways to holiness and wisdom and the good life for their followers. If Christians are going to convert anyone, let us convert *ourselves* to a deeper discipleship, and leave the rest to God's love.

There is so much that is wise and good in all this that I'm almost reluctant to say the next bit. Because of course, the Christian Empires with their slaving and killing were appalling. Of course, the Church has been catastrophically arrogant and ignorant. Of course, friendship and conversation with other religions is good, and we have much to learn. And, of course, God is not sending the vast majority of his beloved children to Hell. To deny any of that just seems foolish in the extreme.

But – there is a but:

If the Church ever decided that actually, Christianity was just one path amongst others.

If we ever said that *Jesus* was just another great spiritual teacher – like Buddha, Mohammed or Guru Nanak.

If we ever decided that there's a Christian vision of reality, a Jewish vision of reality, a Hindu one and a Native American one and that they're all equally true and equally good and that Jesus is in no way the Lord: over and above and fulfilling them all.

If we ever said that Jesus is not, after all, the One around whom all things move, the One in whom all things hang together.

If we ever said that his life, and death, and resurrection were not after all the events that saved the world, which shape the destiny of every single human life that ever has been or will be.

If we ever said he was *not* the one before whom, one day, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess.

If we ever said all that, we would undoubtedly make our lives much easier. We would undoubtedly appear to the wider world much less arrogant. Wiser, humbler, gentler, less offensive. More attractive.

But at the cost of ripping out the heart of the New Testament, and what Christians have always believed about Jesus. It's what Paul is going on about in that dense passage from Ephesians: his entire struggle is to say that God has put the human race back together again

around Jesus and in Jesus. There is no longer Jew and Gentile – or at least, no longer Jew and Gentile split off from each other. They are members of one body, sharers in one promise. And if that holds true for Jew and Gentile, it holds true for Gentile and Gentile also: there is now no Indian, no European, no Eskimo split off from each other – we belong together, in one body, one promise: held together in Jesus.

And what Paul says in abstract argument, Matthew says in a picture of three wise men coming to worship the infant Jesus. The entire point is that they are not Jews, they are from the distant, exotic East. Their story is not Israel's story. They were not raised on the history of Moses and David, their hopes and dreams were different, foreign. But here they come to Bethlehem, and what Matthew is saying is '*look*: here is God's great surprise. It is all *one* story. We all belong together. There's not one God for Jews, and another for the East. Not one Saviour for Israel, and others for the rest. No: one God. One Saviour. All our stories come together, *here*, in this baby. This baby is for the world.'

That's what Epiphany means. This baby is for the world. So, here's the challenge for us this morning. Are we so ashamed of the church's past, and so afraid of appearing arrogant now, that we're close to giving up the very heart of Christianity? Are we embarrassed by the claim at the heart of the New Testament: that Jesus Christ is the desire of all the nations, God's answering Word to the deepest hopes and dream and questions of every single human life that has ever been, and will ever be? That his death and resurrection have saved *everyone* - Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, secular, young, old, rich, poor, clever, foolish, whoever and whatever they are? And if we are not ashamed of that Gospel, then how will we show all these wonderfully different people that Jesus is the centre not just of our life, but theirs? That's part of what a church is for. Let's spend 2018 working out how to do it. Amen.

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