



The Church of England  
in Essex and East London

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Diocese of Chelmsford

**A Sermon for the feast of Epiphany**

**6 January 2019**

**Text: Matthew 2.1-13**

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'Epiphany' means manifestation. In this feast we celebrate Christ's manifestation to the world. This Child who until now was known only to his immediate surroundings and people is now being worshipped and recognized by some wise men from foreign lands. The world outside Judaism is now brought into the story to emphasise that Jesus is not a 'Jewish Messiah' as many would have expected but is the Lord of the whole world. What do we learn from this story for our practical lives?

**Firstly, we can lose sight of God even when he is so close to us.** Jesus was born among the Jews. By the time the visit of the wise men took place, the holy family must have made friends with the people of the locality. Obviously, the story is not talking about a baby lying in a manger but a child living with his parents in a house.

This episode tells us something about the failure of the people of God. The wise men among the people of God, consisting of chief priests and the teachers of scripture, advised Herod about the place where the Messiah was to be born. They studied scripture and found the vital information about the Messiah. Yet none of them is shown to be having an interest in paying homage to him. They are busy advising Herod.

These leaders of Jewish community are enjoying the benefits of Herod's administration. They would not want a Messiah to upset the status quo. A false confidence in the existing systems can blind our eyes. We would fail to see God's work outside those systems which we defend and venerate. We would lose sight of God even though he is very much close to us.

We need the openness shown by these gentile wise men, if we are to recognize God's work today. In a world where we feel that material provisions have made our life secure, we will lose sight of God. In a religion where God is domesticated and tailored to meet our interests, we will lose sight of a God who works in unexpected and unconventional ways. In a culture where we grow in confidence in ourselves, we would not even find the need for God! This possibility or the reality of losing sight of God, while he is very much in our midst, should be a matter of concern for us.

**Secondly, we need to persevere in order to encounter God.** The Jewish leaders might have quickly responded to the Messiah born in Bethlehem if there were something so spectacular and appealing. It should have been at least a noble and royal birth! Or scripture should have

been more specific so that they could identify the child without any mistake! How are we to recognize God's work without clear guidance? We would probably wait for instructions and guidelines in clear and certain terms.

On the contrary, the wise men in our story are a persisting lot. They were probably not very clear about what they were heading for. They had a sign but they lost it on the way. It was then possibly a path of uncertainty and darkness. But these wise men never gave up. They did not abandon their journey in the face of obvious obstacles on the way. In the absence of any clear guideline, they made mistakes ending up in a wrong place. But their persistence took them till the end of the road.

We do not encounter God because we do not persevere in seeking him. We look for him in certain obvious places and when we do not find him there we give up. We are not willing to take long journeys in unfamiliar territories of our lives. In a world of instant things where we are able to receive instant food and instant clothing, we also look for instant solutions to our spiritual problems. We expect instant peace and instant happiness and then grow very uneasy and impatient in our journey. The feast of the Epiphany says, "never give up".

***Thirdly, God has several and varied ways of dealing with us.*** God's message to the wise men initially came to them as a star. It looks an unusual way of revelation. This is not the way God spoke to his people either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. We must remember that these wise men are not Jews and hence God could not speak to them through scripture and tradition. A good number of wise men in the East had keen interest in astronomy. If this is the case, God spoke to them in a language that they would understand. The point is that God has several ways of speaking and we cannot draw restrictions on his channels of communication. We should accept that. We should not expect everybody else to have the same kind of experience we have.

Variety and plurality are not signs of abnormality. We often face the danger of someone or some group of believers monopolising spiritual experience and insisting on stereotype expressions of spirituality. We should know that God is free to choose the means of communication for different people in different ways. He has a way for the mature, another for the weak; one for the enlightened and another for the illiterate. There may be spectacular signs like star, but they are exceptions not the norm. We should just be open to

God's voice in our lives as we continue to listen to the voice that is already clear in scripture, tradition and in our surroundings.

The Epiphany is Christmas for the whole world; it is Christ manifesting outside his own home and his own people. The work of Christmas carries on. God keeps on manifesting himself to us in the creation, in scripture, in our very life experience. God is seeking after you and me. Come let us adore him. **Amen**