**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**January 3rd – The Feast of The Epiphany**

**(Jeremiah 31:7-14 and Matthew 2:1-12)**

**“A Different Way”**

*Dear Friends,*

*I hope you had a blessed Christmas, and that this finds you doing as well as possible in these ongoing tough times: Happy New Year!*

*As of today, we’ve made the hard decision to take our Sunday services online again, for the time being. Our overriding concern is for the safety of all. In the light of rapidly increasing Covid cases, we believe that this has to be the right decision, until the most vulnerable of us have been vaccinated, and we see case numbers drop significantly. I’m sure that some of us will be disappointed, but hope you understand why we’ve felt we have to do so. Our church buildings do remain open for private prayer, however – details of when and where are at the end of this service transcript.*

*Today, I’m delighted that Annie Dickinson, our Lay Reader, is sharing with us her thoughts on part of the prophecy of Jeremiah, alongside the very familiar narrative of the Magi journeying to worship the Christ-child in Bethlehem. I hope you enjoy it.*

*Do keep safe - my very best wishes and prayers are with you all,*



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The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for the Feast of the Epiphany
(Common Worship)**

Creator of the heavens,
who led the Magi by a star
to worship the Christ-child:
guide and sustain us,
that we may find our journey’s end
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**As with Gladness**

**Played by Sarah Hadfield**

As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright;
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to thee.

As with joyful steps they sped
Saviour, to thy lowly bed,
There to bend the knee before
Thee whom heaven and earth adore;
So may we, with willing feet,
Ever seek thy mercy-seat.

As they offered gifts most rare
At thy cradle rude and bare;
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from sin’s alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to Thee, our heavenly King.

Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds Thy glory hide.

In the heavenly country bright
Need they no created light;
Thou, its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun which goes not down;
There for ever may we sing
Alleluias to our King.

**Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 31:7-14
(New International Version)**

**Read by Mike Senior**

*This is what the Lord says:
‘Sing with joy for Jacob;
 shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
 “Lord, save your people,
 the remnant of Israel.”
See, I will bring them from the land of the north
 and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
 expectant mothers and women in labour;
 a great throng will return.
They will come with weeping;
 they will pray as I bring them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
 on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel’s father,
 and Ephraim is my firstborn son.
‘Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;
 proclaim it in distant coastlands:
“He who scattered Israel will gather them
 and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.”
For the Lord will deliver Jacob
 and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.
They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
 they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord –
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
 the young of the flocks and herds.
They will be like a well-watered garden,
 and they will sorrow no more.
Then young women will dance and be glad,
 young men and old as well.
I will turn their mourning into gladness;
 I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.
I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
 and my people will be filled with my bounty,’
declares the Lord.*

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 2:1-12
(New International Version)**

**Read by Patrick Newton**

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’*

*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written:*

 *‘“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
 are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
 who will shepherd my people Israel.”’*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.’*

*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

**Sermon: “A Different Way” – Annie Dickinson**
A very Happy New Year to you. At the end of a tough year let’s look forward to a more hopeful year.

Today’s readings (Jeremiah and Matthew) are quite difficult. On the one hand we’ve got the wise men. It’s a story that’s too familiar and it would be easy to miss the significance. Matthew is the only one who records this event, and he is speaking to a Jewish Christian community, probably just before or just after the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. Unlike Mark, Matthew is not interested in giving a historical account of the life and death of Jesus. His interest is much deeper. He’s writing to Jewish/Hebrew Christians at a very tough time for them; and he chooses the events he chooses to include in his gospel in order to demonstrate the deep, spiritual significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. He’s very keen for his Jewish followers to understand these deep truths. Matthew wants them to be very clear about the Divine identity of Jesus – both man and God, as well as the radical nature of the Kingdom of God, that it’s an upside down Kingdom that’s very different from the ‘world’ and has very different values. Something new has happened and Matthew wants his listeners to understand this. So it’s in this context that we need to ask ourselves ‘Why does Matthew relate this little story about the wise men?’ And we’ll look at this in a moment.

So that’s on the one hand – we’ve got the wise men, a familiar story.

On the other hand we’ve got Jeremiah and he is really tough! He’s probably the most difficult of the prophets because his book is almost entirely one about the coming judgement of God and it’s really ‘doom and gloom’ – Jeremiah continually saying ‘Disaster’s going to come on you guys if you don’t return to faith in God’, and foretelling all sorts of dreadful things that are going to happen (and did happen) including the sacking of Jerusalem and destruction of God’s Holy Temple. Except, Chapters 30 to 33. There are 52 chapters in Jeremiah and these 4 chapters are the only ones that are positive, happy and even joyful, and it’s here that we have our reading for today. It’s in these chapters that God provides ‘consolation’, he tells Israel of his continuing, everlasting love - his faithfulness; that despite the awful things that you’re going to experience, my Covenant with you is everlasting. Salvation will come, and Jeremiah says very specifically ‘a New Covenant will come… one in which I will come and ‘dwell’ within you, I will write my laws (my Torah, my teaching) on their hearts’, he says. This is not like the Covenant of Sinai; something very new and very different is going to happen. So despite all of these things, you are going to experience a ‘New’ Covenant. It’s like, in the midst of the dreadful things that happen God is saying ‘Hang on in there, hope is coming.’

So joy will come. A new Covenant will arise. One in which my teaching, my Torah, my law, my mind, my Spirit will be within them. They won’t have to try to be Holy; they won’t have to learn how to be Holy, because all of them will know me intimately.

This is the message that leads us to the baby Jesus…

I wonder if some of these things ring a bell for you, things that Jeremiah talks about in his prophecies…

First do you notice that it speaks clearly about Jesus’ promise of the New Covenant? It’s Jeremiah who first mentions the New Covenant. Think of the last supper, Matthew 26, where Jesus says ‘This is my blood of the New Covenant.’ He’s harking back to Jeremiah.

Or perhaps it reminds you of Jesus announcing himself as the promised Messiah (the Christ). For example in Luke 4:18 where at the very beginning of his ministry he gets up in the synagogue and quotes Isaiah as about himself, ‘God has anointed me to preach the good news and to heal the broken-hearted.’ This is a Messianic verse from the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament.

Or perhaps it reminds you about Jesus promising all of us, who believe in him, the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit. For example in John 14:26, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, who the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and he will bring to your remembrance all the things that I have said to you.” This is just one of the mentions of God’s Holy Spirit ‘indwelling’ us.

Or perhaps, even best of all, does it reminds you about the promise of eternal life? I’m looking at John 3:16 as just one of them ‘For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.’

So Jeremiah does, in fact, lead us to the baby in Bethlehem, in the city of David, to the birth of Jesus, and eventually to the wise men.

Instead of repeating a too-familiar story about the wise men, I want to draw out just a few of the things Matthew may have been intending to draw out and that his Hebrew community would recognise and understand. Remember, he is the only one who bothers to record this tiny incident. And Matthew chooses what to include in his gospel for a very specific reason. Unlike Mark he’s not interested in recounting a chronology of Jesus’ life, he wants to make a point in each account he relates.

He’s talking to Hebrew Christians who know their Scripture, and he wants them to be clear about who this Jesus is, that he is the promised Messiah, that he is Divine, and some deep truths about the Kingdom of God.

So this story of the wise men seems to have special significance to Matthew. I wonder what it is! Here are a couple of suggestions…

The first thing I believe he wants us to understand is that this is the first ‘clash’ between the ‘world’ and the Kingdom of God and God’s plan. It began at the very beginning of Jesus’ life. Herod is seeking to kill any potential rival (he’s very good at this – he has a history of it), and he’s so desperate to do this that he’s quite prepared to kill scores of babies to be sure. So this is a clash between our world and Heaven; and it may surprise you to see that the clash between Jesus and the world didn’t start with the temptation of Satan. It began at the very beginning of his birth and life, where the world sought to destroy the Saviour.

The second thing I believe Matthew wants us to see is the ‘wise people’ – the ‘magi’. That there were a few wise people who were paying attention to God, looking at the signs of the times, undoubtedly reading their Hebrew Scriptures, and responding to God’s call. They were listening, watching and responding. And these weren’t locals, they weren’t local theologians, they were unexpected people from far away, just a few people, who were listening, watching and responding to God’s call.

The third thing Matthew alludes to is Christ’s identity – as Divine, as King (king of the universe) and as human. This is being proclaimed by the wise men in their gifts, whether they realised it or not, we really don’t know but again, to Hebrews understanding their Scripture… the present of gold, gold was about Divinity, it was the symbol of God; frankincense was a symbol or worship and anointing, and myrrh was used for embalming and for death. There may be other things that these gifts represented, but these three would have been recognised by the Jews. So Jesus’ death, as well as his divinity and his kingship, is being proclaimed here, at the very start, through Matthew.

And the fourth thing is the response that’s possible to all of this, which is where we, perhaps, can be challenged…

We can see three responses from this story of the wise men.

First is anger – that was Herod’s response, anger and fear. And even now we see many who have this response to God, who rage at the very thought of God, including those who seek to destroy or even outlaw faith. You can probably think of people who are very ‘evangelical’ about their anger at the concept of God.

So there is anger, there is also indifference, which is another option for us. This was the priests and the scribes. For remember they were the ones who said to the wise men. ‘Oh yes, we know exactly where the Messiah is to come from, it’s Bethlehem, that’s where you need to go.’ But did they follow? No. Were they interested? Not at all. So this is an option for us as well, to say ‘yes, we know all of this, but so what? We have other things that are more important.’

As well as anger or indifference, the third option open to us is the wise men themselves, which is commitment. They had identified themselves with God and were prepared to walk a path as directed by Him. We see this in their ‘listening’ for God, and when he said ‘No, don’t go back to Herod, go a different way home’, they were obedient and went in a different path. And this is the call to each of us, that once we come to Christ our walk is forever changed, our path is changed, and the one who directs us is changed.

For once we see and believe in Jesus, and listen to God’s voice, and follow his direction, we also begin a new way, to our real home – we return home (to Heaven) a different way. Think of Jesus when he says “I go to prepare a place for you.” We are invited to make our way back to God.

So from Jeremiah perhaps there is a message for us today, particularly in these days. For God is saying very clearly through Jeremiah ‘ Don’t fear all these things you see around you – all these troubles, all these difficulties, even disasters, even death, even destruction. For God has a future in store for you, for us, and it’s one that will bring you joy, when you come through this.

And in Matthew a reminder that (quoting Isaiah) ‘Unto us a child was born’ in David’s birthplace, and his name is ‘Immanu-el (literally ‘God with or within us’), the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace and of his reign and his peace there shall be no end.’

So a hopeful message for a new year. Difficulties are there, but we can hold on to a constant faith in the everlasting Promise… God says again and again in his Scriptures that ‘My Covenant is everlasting and I have a plan for mankind and I will bring it to completion/fruition. And when you arrive home there will be much joy.

Have a happy new year. And ‘Hallelujah!’

**Intercessions**

**Led by Jules Humpheson**

Heavenly Father, you sent your son to guide us, just as you sent a star to guide the Wise Men. Guide your Church as we begin a New Year that will bring significant changes; we pray that you will always be present along our journey of faith.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

Lord God, as we face the start of 2021 we pray for your world. Lord, whose family become refugees in Egypt, let us see your face when we see the plight of refugees the world over. Help us to follow your teachings and stand up for the poor, for those in need and for the stranger. We also pray that this year will see the end of the pandemic as the programme of vaccination continues worldwide. Help us to ensure that everyone gets access to the vaccine and not just the privileged nations.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

Lord, we recognise that this time of year is difficult for many, particularly the lonely and those who are struggling financially due to the pandemic. We pray that you help us to bring them comfort in their need. Guide us in our own relationships with family and neighbours, especially those in trouble or need and bless those who have guided and enriched our own lives.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

Loving God, we pray for all those who are ill at this time and for those who look after them in their own homes, in Care Homes and in hospitals and hospices. We remember the chronically ill, those in constant pain, the depressed and the despairing. We especially remember Ginny Whitmore from Aslockton in our prayers; her road to recovery has been long, but she is now back at home.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

Merciful Lord, we pray for all who are coming to the end of their journey here on earth and pray that they may come into your presence and kingdom. We especially pray for Irene Staton from Orston, who is nearing the end of her life after a long declining illness. We pray for all those who have come before your face and now rejoice in the fullness of life eternal.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

Lord, may we be like the Wise Men who were guided to you by a star. Give us the wisdom to seek you, light to guide us to you, courage to search until we find you, graciousness to worship you and generosity to lay our gifts before you, who are our King and our God for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

 **The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the Feast of the Epiphany
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen**

 **What Child Is This?
Played by Sarah Hadfield**

What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding
Good Christians, fear, for sinners her
The silent Word is pleading.

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through
The cross be borne for me, for you
Hail, hail the Word made flesh
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh
Come peasant, king to own Him
The King of kings salvation brings
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

Raise, raise a song on high
The Virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ our Lord,
to whom kings bowed down in worship
and offered gifts
reveal to you his glory
and pour upon you the riches of his grace;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**