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Epiphany (Jan 23rd 2022)

Isaiah 9:2-7 & Gospel of John 3: 16-21

As we gather here for the first time in 2022, I do not wish you “Happy New Year” because the the Church’s new year started back on Advent Sunday. But I do wish you “Happy Christmas”. Because this season of Epiphany is a continuation of Christmas, as we celebrate and delve further into what the birth of Jesus means for us and for the world. So whilst this service may be, for me and the choir, a working event, for the rest of you it should be a party!

The central motif of the Epiphany season is very much the light which has dawned upon the world. Let there be light! The Epiphany begins with the arrival of the Magi, or the Three Wise Men, but even before that there were other visitors, the shepherds (as we’ve just heard in the Anthem). They all saw the Christ-child and began to ask, What does this mean? The Epiphany season ends at Candlemas, with Simeon and Anna greeting the infant child as the one who will be “the light to enlighten the Gentiles”,

For us, Christmas this year has seen a Return, a Departure, and an Arrival.

The Return was the stand-up comedian Ben Elton, completing his international tour here in London. Ben Elton made his name back in the 1980’s. He’s now 62 years old, and it’s fifteen years since his last stand-up tour. On the night I saw him at the Pinter theatre it was only half-full, due to COVID, but he stood there, alone on stage, and did nearly two and a half hours of scatter-gun and direct-fire material. And what still marks him out is his refusal to follow other satirists, as on “Have I got news for you”, in which everyone is ridiculed and dismissed as a fool or liar. But nor does he engage in laborious “balance”, of the kind already annoying on the BBC and now destined to get even worse in trying to appease the Government. Instead he chooses his targets according to their moral worth, or the lack of it, and only then goes for the jugular.

This latest show felt almost apocalyptic, claiming that we were now entering a new Dark Age. He blamed the last one largely on the medieval Church, and the way it sought to prevent people like Galileo from exploring and speaking the truth. He believed that the Enlightenment was a liberation from that kind of authoritarian

control, which had been held in the hands of a few powerful people. But now, he claimed, the Enlightenment has become brutalised. Power rests again with those who reject science (like the Anti-Vaccers), and even more with those who reject any moral truth which might get in the way of their own power or prosperity. We are in a new Dark Age, an age of manipulation, abuse and lies. In the light of more recent events he might have asked whether even Downing Street is now a “Grey” area. And then, remarkably for any of us versed in the Scriptures, he shouted “Let there be light”. He finished his act by walking off stage shouting, “Let there be light”.

The Departure over the Christmas period was Bishop Desmond Tutu, who died on Boxing Day aged 90. Tutu was simply God’s gift, to a country (South Africa) and to the wider world where the need for justice and reconciliation could not be greater. At the political level he fought the case, he risked assassination, for what he believed to be the rights of every person, whatever their race. And when people told him that Christian leaders should not get involved in politics he would smile and ask “Which Bible are you reading?”. He often preferred humour to outright attack. Like, on colonialism: when the Europeans came they told us we have the Bible and you have the land, so let’s close our eyes and pray, and when we opened our eyes we had the Bible and they had the land.

Or if you’d prefer one of Tutu’s Christmas jokes about the Virgin Birth: Joseph goes up to the Inn Keeper and says, You’ve got to help, my wife is having a baby. The Inn Keeper replies, that’s not my fault. And Joseph says, it’s not my fault either.

Tutu was of course able to do what he did because of his deep faith. And that led him into areas which many lawyers find difficult. He believed in the rule of law, but he thought that law alone could not meet the pain of those who have suffered or provide a way to secure a more just future. His Truth and Reconciliation Commission transcended the judgement and the penalising which the Law on its own might have imposed. He believed in forgiveness, but only after genuine repentance. Whilst we in this country toy with mediation in civil cases, and tinker with restorative justice in criminal ones, Tutu, drawing from the well of his Christian faith, challenges us to find a better way forward.

A return, a departure, and an arrival. Because every Christmas announces the birth of Jesus. Every Epiphany season celebrates the light that has dawned upon the world. “Let there be light”. Whatever the failures of the Church in the past, the Christian Gospel claims that in the birth of this baby God acts to claim back his world, and he does so not through judgement and domination but through the power of love.

As we enter 2022 there are many choices before us. We can of course retreat back into the Dark Ages. The marks of that are all around us: the culture of double standards and elitist entitlement, the inequalities within and between nations which COVID has so cleverly exploited. Or we can ask, what would Tutu do? Or even more, what does God require?

At the end of the Baptism which will follow this service we give the children a lighted candle. Light in the darkness. The baby at Bethlehem, the man who he grew up to be, offers us a way to find a new dawn. But it needs us to respond. In the wider world of politics, and of the Law, are we prepared to work for what the Tutu sought, a new world based on Truth and on Reconciliation? Will we learn anything from two years of COVID? That nurses are more important than stock-brokers. That no-one is safe unless we are all safe. That poverty and inequality are public health issues. That cutting International Aid is not the way to deal with a global pandemic. Jesus came to shine such light into the darkness of our world. As we heard in the last lesson at the Carol Service, "in him was life, and that life was the light of the world. And the darkness has never overcome it."

And that is also true for each one of us, personally, individually. The offer of forgiveness and acceptance. Something which is given, not earned. Which is why of course we baptise babies, because the starting point is not what we do but what God has done for us. But it needs us to respond. And so we pray, "Come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee". [Words for the hymn which followed]