

Readings:-

Isaiah ch.46, v3- end

Matthew ch.2, v13-end

John ch.2, vv1-11 (Epiphany)

by

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Christmas 2020 – a strange time. Hardly an original comment of course, but strange times usually but not always bring difficulty and sadness. Sometimes we discover something good.

We stumbled on a BBC broadcast of the Midnight Mass at the Roman Catholic Clifton Cathedral in Bristol, and decided to watch. It was most interesting.

Architecture is nothing if not a stimulating subject for spirited exchanges of views, and Clifton has been dismissed as “brutalist” by some. The cathedral is a very modern and no doubt very costly building which aspires to resemble a power station, which of course is exactly what it is. The interior is excellently designed, and allowed social distancing, with a large chancel-cum-sanctuary which allowed space not only for the rite itself, but a small music group and a choir on the south side.

As an Anglican one has to look past the effusion of lace and net curtain to the service itself, which was somewhere between Series Two and the ASB. The penitential part of the service was short and focussed directly on our weakness and corruption, and the absolution was also short and sharp. The readings were movingly delivered, but the sermon, no doubt well intended, was too long and was largely an expansion of Isaiah ch.61. One should not dwell overlong past midnight. The almost unending Nicene Creed was replaced, glory be, by the Apostles’ Creed, and the prayers were reminiscent of the Anglican “Green Book”. Bishop Declan Lang presided with the prayers over the bread and wine.

The music was modern and amorphous, and the choir felt as though a baritone and a bass would have added to its depth. We missed the hymns of course, but the choir broke into carols beautifully sung during the distribution of the bread. I have dwelt on the service, since it felt good, and so similar to our celebration that one wishes for a closer relationship, unhindered by church politics. I have attached some illustrations of the cathedral at the end.

I take the view that the Nativity is the most important event in the church year. Had God, in love and grace, not chosen to step on earth as a human being to teach, to lead, to heal and to speak of his love for us, surely there would be no Christian faith, no Easter, no schisms, no church politics or argument. That needs to be declaimed strongly. We should not greet the memory of Christ’s birth by recalling his death but by giving thanks for his coming: surely there must be someone with the theology, the poetry and the wit to compose a liturgy of Nativity thanksgiving?



In this past week we have remembered the Holy Innocents, slaughtered by an angry and frightened Herod, the murder of Thomas a Becket at Canterbury, and the death of John Wycliffe, the earliest priest and scholar to translate scripture, as well as St. John last Sunday. On Friday we recall the naming and circumcision of Jesus, at which the old priest Simeon prayed his thanks to God in the wonderful words of the Nunc Dimittis.

The story of the Three Wise Men is one

which invites disbelief, as I have often said. Only Matthew's Gospel includes it. Yet it is the event from which chapter two develops, with the slaughter of the innocents and the flight to Egypt. It is a beautiful story, weaving mystery and scripture together, the wise men, or kings, appearing to have come from country which is now occupied by the Kurds, or Medes, their ancestors.

An Epiphany is a sight, or a proximity or an experience of God. Simeon experienced an epiphany when he saw baby Jesus. The Wise Men were almost certainly Gentiles, who gazed upon God in human form. John tells of the wedding at Cana, at which Jesus' first miracle occurred, when all present saw – and drank – the work of God's hand. The journey to Egypt and the return to Nazareth must have brought the young Jesus into the presence of Gentiles as well. Many, mainly Orthodox Christians, celebrate the Nativity at Epiphany. It is illustrated usually as the visit of the Wise Men, probably because it would be difficult to envisage an epiphany otherwise.



**In
our
prayers
let's
remember
those of us**

who Isaiah and Luke described and of whom Jesus spoke:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *them that are bound*;

To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

AMEN

