

Sunday 5th January

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Back in 1994, just before the elections that brought Nelson Mandela to be president took place, I visited South Africa with my then wife and our three children – who were aged between 7 and 12.

We spent our first few days in Durban, enjoying the beach, the ocean and the sun. We then took a plane to Cape Town where we were to meet up with my parents in law who were working in South Africa at the time. The plan was to meet them at a house they had rented for a few days. They had given us copious directions of how to get there in the hire car from the airport.

However, nothing ever goes quite to plan. These were the days before sat navs and mobile phones, and we got hopelessly lost in the dark on our way from the airport. We found ourselves in what was most definitely a black suburb of Cape Town. We were clearly well off course, but had no idea how to get back to where we should be. I decided to go into a shop to ask for directions. I don't think I have ever felt so awkward and out of place in my life. White tourists just did not come here. I am still not entirely sure how much of the discomfort was caused by my own prejudices and assumptions rather than by the actual situation as in retrospect I don't think that we were ever in any kind of danger. We were more of a curiosity.

Today is the feast of the Epiphany – a feast that celebrates Jesus being revealed to the world – primarily we remember to those outside the Jewish nation. We recall the visit of the wise men – foreigners of course; and we remember their journey bearing the gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh. Traditionally we believe they travelled from somewhere in modern Iran. If they made the journey today they would have to cover nearly 1000 miles through war torn Iraq and Syria, and having left Jerusalem heading for Bethlehem they would have found a 25 foot fence preventing their access without going through a check point. I am sure they didn't have to face those kind of problems, but they probably had other obstacles to face as they followed the star – perhaps an alignment of the planets Jupiter (known as the royal planet) and Saturn (associated with the Jews) – which to them indicated that a new King had been born to the Jews.

But the importance is that gentiles – non-Jews, foreigners, outsiders – were amongst the first people we see worshipping Jesus. And the others who were there to witness his birth – shepherds – were the outcasts, those on the edge of society. Right at the start of the gospel stories the message is loud and clear that this Jesus, this King, this Messiah would be for everyone. And that is certainly the message the Jesus preached and modelled through his life, and the message the early church sought to follow.

And perhaps for us its hard to appreciate the radical and significant nature of this. The Messiah was always expected to be the one who would restore the nation of Israel to greatness, who would lead them out of oppression and captivity and establish a new kingdom, like the heady and glorious days of King David, but even better.

And yet here we see foreigners' worship and gifts accepted without question. And in the life and mission of Jesus we begin to see that God's plan isn't just for one nation but for the whole world. There were no limits to the love of God. It included everyone. From the least to the greatest, from the Jew to the gentile.

The great apostle Paul was one of the first Christians to realise the full implications of this – he outlines some of his thinking in the reading from Ephesians that we had this morning, and he summarises it in that great passage from his letter to the Galatians - *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* If we read the history of the early church in Acts we begin to see how much of a struggle it was for Paul to convince Jewish Christians that this was so.

And here we are some 2000 years later. What has all this got to say to us? Surely we know that the gospel is for all people. The vast majority of Christians around the globe are gentiles – indeed there are probably Christians from every race and ethnic group in the world.

But look around us here for a moment today – this church, this congregation. We are all very similar. We are all white; middle aged to elderly; (predominantly female); British; similar background and upbringing.

How would we react if someone who was not like us came to worship with us here? And how would they feel? Would they feel awkward *and out of place as I did in that shop in the black suburb of Cape Town?* Or would they feel comfortable and at home amongst Christian brothers and sisters?

I was privileged to serve my curacy in a Parish in the East End of London – on the border between Islington and Hackney. The parish consisted of 4 or 5 large council estates – including some run down tower blocks and the notorious Marquess estate; in addition there were streets of large Georgian houses, many of which had been converted into flats. Consequently the population of the parish was mixed between people whose families had lived there for generations, West Indians who had come across on the Windrush, West Africans, a sizeable Turkish population, Asians and white professionals who worked in the city and had found some affordable housing.

There were tensions across the community, but the church was the one place where people from all these backgrounds and more met together. Our congregation was as mixed as the parish population – which made it much easier to assimilate and welcome new people. They could almost always see someone like them, and the worship of the church tried to reflect the different traditions and backgrounds .

Now, I don't think that the churches in Shirley parish are unrepresentative of the parish population, apart from the fact we have only one or two from Asian background represented across our various congregations. But I do think the fact we are all so similar in many ways makes it hard when someone who is a bit different comes along.

If we look back to the days of the apostle Paul and the early church, I don't think the fact that gentiles were accepting the Christian faith was the main problem the church had to face. The greatest opposition to what Paul was saying and doing came from those Jewish Christians who basically said – its fine for these gentiles to join the church as long as they fit in with the way we do things – ie as long as they become like us and obey our rules and follow our customs – as long as they conform.

So maybe its worth thinking for a moment about the expectations we place on visitors and newcomers. Do we expect them to be able to conform with what we do – or do we hope to learn new things from them. These are important questions. Like any church we need new people to join us; otherwise in a few

years we will no longer be a viable church congregation. But we have to make those people welcome and allow them to belong. And belonging means making a contribution and – quite likely – having new ideas.

When a new baby is born, or a new person joins a family through adoption or marriage or whatever, the dynamic of the family changes. It can never be the same again. Surely the same should be true if someone joins the church family. The church will be different.

On the back of our pewslip is a note saying that our churches services are open and public. We are not private clubs, we are God's church. Anyone can come and join us – its up to us to ensure they are welcomed, valued and included. Its up to us to make them feel that this can be there home, and that they can journey here with us and with God.