

<b>Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2016 Cathedral, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m.</b>		<b>The Epiphany of our Lord (transferred from 6<sup>th</sup> January)</b>
Isaiah 60:1-6	Psalm 72:1- 7,10-14	Ephesians 3:1-12
		Matthew 2:1-12
<b>GOD'S GRACE AND LOVE POURED OUT</b>		

“Arise, shine, Jerusalem, for your light has come; and over you the glory of the Lord has dawned. Though darkness covers the earth and dark night the nations, on you the Lord shines and over you his glory will appear...” (Isaiah 60:1-2)

## **New Year**

On this first Sunday of 2016, I would like to wish you all a very happy new year. This past year has been a bit like some of our roads here in the Eastern Cape: full of unexpected potholes and bumps; but there have also been some wonderful moments and events for us, both personally and as a community. So, as Claire reminded us last Sunday, the new year is a time to give thanks; to have an attitude of gratitude; and it is a time to be open to God’s grace and guidance for all that lies ahead.

Our hearts go out to all who have lost loved ones in car accidents, or drowning, during the holiday season. All of us have a responsibility to keep safe and keep others safe. At the same time, social media has been full of new year wishes and prayers, pictures of people at the beach and on holiday, people partying till all hours in whirl of excitement and celebration.

A couple of rather tame New Year quotes (the others I found were not really repeatable from the pulpit):

“An optimist stays up until midnight to see the New Year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves.” (Bill Vaughn)

“Youth is when you’re allowed to stay up late on New Year’s Eve; middle age is when you’re forced to.” (Bill Vaughn).

And then there are all these new year resolutions, the promises we make to ourselves to change our lives, do better, start exercising, learn to play the piano, run the Comrades marathon, fly to the moon, and the old favourite, lose weight. “You know it’s time for a new year’s resolution to lose weight when you step on a talking scale and it says, ‘One at a time, please!’ ”

This may well be the year when you finally get to tackle a project you’ve been putting off for ages; the year when the door that you have been watching and praying about, finally opens for you; the year when there is a significant shift in your life. Certainly for some, 2016 will be a year of new beginnings – children, grandchildren, starting Grade 1, or going to high school, young people off to university; people moving to start a new job, a new town, a new community.

We face a number of uncertainties: the effects of the drought; the prospect of further university protests; possible further terror attacks in Europe and parts of Africa; the ongoing repercussions following the sudden dismissal of the Minister of Finance; the outrage and astonishment at the way President Zuma played fast and loose with the economy of our country; our sense of fragility. And our own personal questions, the unknown, what may be waiting for us.

As a church we have the Synod of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa meeting in East London, in February, with plans for a march and service of commemoration at the site of the Bhishe massacre; we have our own diocesan synod in May, and Provincial Synod in September – and it is likely that the question of the blessing of same-sex partnerships will be on the agenda.

It is into this exciting and topsy-turvy world that Jesus is born, that the glory of God is revealed – it is into our lives that God comes with love and grace – we celebrate the wild card of the gospel, the good news, the unexpected, the possibilities that are just around the corner, the

star that leads us to Bethlehem and to the child who is born king. So our prayer is that this will be a year of grace; a year when we walk more closely with God; a year when we encounter God's love and mercy more fully.

## **Epiphany**

We celebrate today the Feast of the Epiphany. The word "epiphany" means "appearing" or "revelation" or "manifestation". We speak of having an epiphany moment – when suddenly we see something clearly for the first time – now I understand! Now it all makes sense! Now I realise what is happening! The visit of the wise men, the Feast of the Epiphany, is also known as the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles – when Christ the hope of the world is shown and revealed, not only to the Jews, but to all people.

The Feast of the Epiphany is a feast of wonder and magic. Stars and dreams; a journey through the dark to the light; kings, wise men from the East, on a journey of discovery; a meeting of civilisations, the academic and learned world coming to kneel before the Christ child; following a dream, a vision; responding to a call; seeing the light; the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh; this is a celebration of mystery, of promise, of hope.

From the prophet Isaiah: "Arise, shine, Jerusalem, for your light has come; and over you the glory of the Lord has dawned. Though darkness covers the earth and dark night the nations, on you the Lord shines and over you his glory will appear..." (Isaiah 60:1-2)

These words of prophecy were given to the people of Israel as they faced their own return from exile in Babylon to the promised land: God gave them this promise of rebuilding, of children who had been lost, being brought back; the hope of the nation being restored – and camels laden with gold and frankincense coming to them – a prophetic reference to the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus. It is God's promise of light in the darkness, the dawn at the end of a long night, hope in the face of despair.

Isaiah's words bring to us God's promise of hope, God's grace and mercy being poured out – not on Jerusalem, the earthly city claimed by both Jew and Palestinian, but on the city of God, the community of God's people.

The birth of Jesus Christ, St Paul tells us, is so that the whole universe may be enfolded in God's purpose: "that through the gospel the Gentiles are joint heirs with the Jews, part of the same body, sharers together in the promise made in Christ Jesus." (Eph 3:6)

This is the star that we follow, the star that leads us to Bethlehem: the star of promise and of hope, the star that brings us to a place of reconciliation with God, with one another, with our enemies, with those different from ourselves. It is the star that leads us through danger to the place of light. It is the star that leads us to the truth.

We travel with the wise men as they find their way to the child Jesus. We listen as they visit Herod, and as they are directed to Bethlehem. We watch as they come to the place where the child is, with Mary and Joseph. We marvel as they offer their gifts to the child: gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one who is to die. We hear the wise men discussing their dream which warns them to avoid returning to Herod, the all-powerful ruler, the earthly king. And so the purposes of God are worked out. The glory of God is revealed.

## **God's grace and love poured out**

The Feast of the Epiphany, the birth of Christ, says that God's love and grace is poured out upon us.

God loves us. God will lead us through the darkness that we face, to find the light.

Keep hope alive, God says, follow the star to Bethlehem: follow the light that God gives us, discover the grace and love of God in the strangest places.

Keep hope alive, God says: be like the wise men who look for the presence of Christ in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty.

God invites you and me, our families, our community, to follow the star, to journey towards the light, to kneel before the child Jesus, to offer our lives, our worship, our adoration.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude with a few lines from a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, lines made famous when they were quoted by King George VI, on Christmas Day, 1939, in his speech to the Empire. The words remain a call and an invitation – and a promise - to us here this morning:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:  
‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’  
And he replied:  
‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.  
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’

“So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.  
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *God Knows* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gate\\_of\\_the\\_Year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gate_of_the_Year) accessed 2nd January 2016