

Invite the world into the presence of Jesus

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Epiphany – Isa 60 1-6 Ps 72 1-7 10-14 Eph 3.1-12 Mt 2.1-12

Visiting a different church one day, I was particularly struck by a welcome note on their bulletin. *All baptized Christians, regardless of their denomination, church affiliation or irregular or non-attendance, are welcomed, invited, and encouraged to receive Communion with us or to come forward for a blessing.* One of the most important things God calls us to do is to welcome visitors of all kinds to belong as completely as they can in the Church community. It's a challenge to all churches.

It's a particular challenge at the feast of the Epiphany; the day when we remember the baby Jesus hosting outsiders; astrologers whose practice is frowned on by many parts of the Church and Judaism. *Are there limits to Christ's welcome?* Epiphany marks the day when representatives of the known world were received into the presence of Christ. Let's consider who was received at Bethlehem; was there anyone Jesus might have left out?

First, of course, there are his parents. We're told in chapter 1 that Joseph and Mary aren't married yet. If you don't think Matthew's trying to make a point of this, look at Matthew's record of Jesus's family tree in that chapter. Four other women named there were illegal or unclean according to Hebrew Scripture (*Tamar – incest, Rahab – prostitution, Ruth – forbidden inter-racial marriage and Bathsheba – adultery*).

If what we're seeing in today's Gospel is a first Christian gathering, it predicts a very broad-minded Church indeed. And it doesn't stop with just this scandal. We heard from Luke at

Christmas that Mary and Joseph had to use a manger, an animal-feed trough, as Jesus's first bed. The earliest Church began in a cave at the back of the house; the space where the animals lived. The traditional story gives us a donkey, cattle and sheep as Jesus's fellow tenants; doubtless accompanied by their attendant insects and parasites. So our Church is yet more open.

Then there are shepherds; again from Luke's account. Shepherds in the Middle East are still mostly children – kids aged between 5 and 11. So the earliest congregation included little urchins too. And of course they'd have brought their sheep and goats with them. So there's the inaugural service of the blessing of the animals.

Then there's the star and its attendant Magi. A Magus is a magician; Deut. 18 declares such a person abhorrent. So it seems that abhorrent people are welcome too; and Matthew placidly records their coming. How much more broad minded do you want to get!?

Finally, there are angels in their thousands. I think we can safely say they enjoy universal approval. But what a gathering! Parents of dubious status from a very questionable pedigree; the animal, vegetable, insect, mineral *and* heavenly kingdoms all represented; and strange foreigners who seek a king – and risk the baby's life by telling Herod about him! That's as broad-minded a church as you could want, isn't it. And the infant Jesus is there in the middle of this wild diversity of angels, people and creatures all gathered under one rocky roof. They were all invited, or else co-opted as hosts. This was no accident.

Is what we've imagined so far about God's welcome – about Jesus's inclusivity – consistent with the rest of Scripture? The psalm today reminds us of God's special concern for the poor, the needy, the helpless, the oppressed and the violated. The reading from Isaiah joyfully proclaims the gathering in of

a scattered family, all guided by the brightness of God's light. And the epistle is a prayer for God's wisdom to be revealed throughout Earth, and indeed beyond it.

That's quite all-inclusive. And Matthew points us in two further directions – one at the beginning and the other at the end of this gospel. Matthew begins with Jesus's genealogy. He begins it with Abraham. The most important moment in Abraham's story is when God promises that through him, all families of Earth will be blessed; not only believers; not just all humans; all *families*. ^{Gen 12.1-4} The tableau we finally have before us in the crib today shows us this blessing embodied.

We find the other direction Matthew points us in right at the end of the gospel. Jesus commits his followers to work to fulfil God's desire – *Go...and make disciples of all nations. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

The tableau before us at Epiphany is a call to us to recognise what God truly desires – universal blessing; grace and peace. It's a call to recognise God's desire for all to be gathered in the divine presence, and having recognised God's desire, it's a call to us to choose to work for it together with Jesus.

Epiphany calls us to that mission; to invite the world into the presence of Jesus – all families of Earth. He's hardly intimidating.

Epiphany also challenges us to ask how wide we can open *our* door; how wide we can open *our* hearts. As wide as we *can* open them, Epiphany challenges us to open our hearts wider still – to risk what we can't yet cope with. Epiphany also challenges us to go outside; to go to the *other* and trust that Jesus goes with us – goes with us to whatever family of Earth he leads us to. Amen