



Christmas Continuesⁱ

*'Do they know it's Christmas time at all?'*ⁱⁱ

So asked Band Aid in 1983, and so ask many Christians each year (myself included) as the festive lights and decorations start coming down and discarded Christmas trees begin to line the streets during the first week of January. For Christians, the party is just getting

started! The celebration of Christmas continues in the Church beyond the festival of Epiphany on 6th January (when we remember the visit of the wise men) to the Feast of Candlemas on the sixth Sunday after Christmas (normally the end of January/beginning of February). Candlemas, also known as The Presentation of Christ, recalls Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the Temple 40 days after his birth to present him to God. It was a traditional naming and thanksgiving ceremony, equivalent in many ways to a modern-day Christening. It is also the finale of the celebration of Christmas, as we recall the words of the prophet Simeon who had been awaiting the coming of God's Messiah:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

*For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."*ⁱⁱⁱ

For now, the season of joyful celebration that began on Christmas Day continues through Epiphany-tide, as the child Jesus is acclaimed by travellers from afar and the most faithful of God's people in Israel as the light to guide all the peoples of the world and the glory of God come amongst us. As much as we all enjoy seeing the lights being switched on and singing along to Christmas songs on the radio in the run-up to Christmas Day, from the Christian perspective this is back-to-front, as the celebrations should *start* on 25th December and then run for a month or more.

There is much to unpack in this time, from the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and dwelling among us, to the remainder of the Christmas story that remains untold at the end of our December carol services. The wise men we are familiar with, but they only arrive a year after that first Christmas night, and their visit comes with severe consequences. Having put the ruthless King Herod on alert there is a pretender to his throne born in Bethlehem but not knowing exactly where, all the baby boys in Bethlehem are mercilessly slaughtered in a vain attempt to snuff out the light that is now shining in the darkness. The holy family escape into Egypt, where Jesus and his parents find themselves living in hiding as aliens and refugees, fearing to return until after Herod himself dies. The first years of Jesus' life are spent in exile and isolation; cut off from all family and friends.

I don't know how much you were able to get into the Christmas spirit this year, with the harsh restrictions and anxieties surrounding escalating COVID infection rates severely limiting how we were able to mark the season of joy and goodwill. You might feel that 2021 has brought us right back to square one; yet again in lockdown without a clear end in sight.

Yet there remains hope. Hope in the roll-out of vaccines. Hope in our knowledge from 2020 that lockdowns do help save lives. Hope that this crisis will end, and we will someday return to our familiar ways of life and those who we long to be reunited with. Hope too that God has personal experience of all these fears and frustrations too, in the life Jesus led. We can be sure that in him we have a God who identifies with all who are suffering during this pandemic, as we also have a God who cares deeply and identifies with the persecuted, the exiled, the isolated and those fleeing for their safety.

There is also hope because Christmas has not ended. It continues, not only till Jan 31st this year, but beyond that in our continuing that journey of hope, as the wise men continued their year-long journey to reach Jesus based on little more than hope and clear nights for star-gazing. The hope which Christmas brings endures; hope that all the promises will be fulfilled, even if it takes longer than we expected. Simeon waited his whole life to see the Messiah, yet he remained vigilant and was instantly able to recognise the baby Jesus for who he was. Setbacks and horrors do not endure or succeed in breaking the power of love come down; the light shines in the darkness still and the darkness cannot overcome it^{iv}.

Through whatever 2021 brings – for good or for ill – we remain one human family, united in our care and love for one another and our shared journey out of the darkness and into the light. Following a star. Following in the ways of Jesus who experienced the worst that life could throw at anyone. When we feel isolated and alone, cut adrift and without hope, we can be comforted in Jesus having experienced all that too – from his birth in the stable to his death on a cross and beyond. Our God has experienced it all before and experiences it anew through his presence with us, wherever we are, whatever we are going through right now, God is with us. That is the continuing promise and reality of Christmas; the Epiphany revealed to us in Jesus.

The word ‘epiphany’ means a moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation. My hope and prayer for 2021 is that we can all experience a fresh epiphany of God’s presence with us, guiding us, comforting us, standing in solidarity with us, and journeying with us in hope to a brighter future. The light is always shining, because God is always with us. So, Christmas continues and continues to teach us afresh. By all means keep the feast and keep the Christmas lights shining bright until February (at least!)

Merry Christmas and Happy New Epiphany!

Amen.

Revd Dave Hover
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ⁱ Photo – Robert Thiemann (www.unsplash.com)

ⁱⁱ *Band Aid* (1983).

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 2:29-32 (NIV).

^{iv} John 1:5.