

**Epiphany Sunday,
Sunday, 10th January 2021**



Dear Friends,

***‘Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you’ (Isaiah 60:1)***

On Wednesday morning of this week, the day of Epiphany, I had the radio on as background noise whilst I prepared to drive up to Oxford to take the funeral of a dear Littleton parishioner. A distinctive voice caught my attention, and before I knew it I was captivated by the story of Robert Chelsea, the first African-American man to have received pioneering face transplant surgery following a roadside car fire in 2013, from which he suffered life-changing burns across 75% of his face and body. In a statement released by the Californian hospital which treated him, Robert Chelsea has said:

This experience has been an incredible journey for me, filled at times with many challenges. Today, however, I am thrilled to say that I’m on the road to recovery thanks to the incredible team of doctors and staff at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, the love and support of my family and friends, and my unwavering faith.



Robert Chelsea – Credit: Radio 4

During his Radio 4 interview, Chelsea was asked what he felt about the drunk driver who had ploughed into his vehicle as he worked to repair an overheating engine. It was only by the grace of God and the heroism a bystander that both men survived the accident. For all the agonies he has suffered, Robert bears the drunk driver, who miraculously escaped the ordeal unscathed, no grudge. Instead, he takes the view that he has no need to forgive him for what was an accident. He says:

When the accident happened, it was only natural to call on God, and when I think of all the things I have done in my life, all the possible accidents I could myself have caused, I have no right to judge somebody else ... I'm really glad that God saw fit to give me a taste of what the disability community has to go through every single day.

Robert's genuine humility has touched all who come into contact with him. Even from the radio, his grace shines out. His sadness for the donor of his new face and for their bereaved family is tempered by his evident joy in being *almost* able to control his lips enough to kiss his daughter's cheek. He chooses to tell his story from the perspective of thanksgiving for his survival, and rejoices in the miracles of his treatment and recovery these past seven years. For me, this faith-filled man is an example of someone who knows that his light has come – to paraphrase poet, Roy McFarlane, Robert Chelsea has *'let his body sing and dance across new horizons ... like a river flowing, roaring with love into the new year.'* His personal Epiphany is to have met with the reality of Christ through the experience of his accident, and now he gives thanks for the gift to share with others the hope and freedom that he finds in Jesus, that they too might recognize him as the Son of God. Bless his soul.



'Adoration of the Magi' by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

In the Christian tradition, the Epiphany of 'Theophany' in Eastern Orthodox language, is one of the first manifestations of God to mankind, when the Magi or Wise Men were

presented to the new-born Christ. It was a moment of revelation, of insight and understanding, as Christ's divinity was revealed, and is for us, a season in which we are encouraged to come and see, come and follow, go and tell others, just as Robert Chelsea has done.

Our readings for Epiphany from Isaiah and Matthew give us a sense of the exotic and mysterious! The places Isaiah mentions, Midian, Ephah and Sheba, are the homelands of obscure tribes who live deep in the Arabian Deserts from Sudan across the Red Sea to Yemen – hundreds of miles from Israel. Likewise, the Magi, who come from the East to kneel before the Christ-Child are shrouded in mystery.



'The Adoration of the Kings' by Jan Gossaert'

When I was at theological college, there were a number of priests and theologians who tried to dispel the myth of the 3 Wise Men and their journey to Bethlehem. It is true that the bible doesn't actually say that the Kings came from the East to visit Jesus. Actually, it reports that the Wise Men *came*, but not *how many* of them there were. Nor did the early Church Fathers suggest that the Magi were kings. The Bible simply mentions the three costly gifts they presented – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Listing these three gifts does not necessarily indicate the number of Magi, nor does it prove from which country these individuals came. Matthew's account speaks simply of 'wise men from the east'; it was a much later tradition that fixed their number at three, made them kings and embellished them with evocative names – Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

For all this, the festival of Epiphany is full of deep and beautiful mystery. It would be a travesty if we were to overlook the marvel and awe of this season in our hurry to

express our scepticism as to historical fact against events as portrayed by the Gospel writers. Of course, God coming to earth as human *cannot* be portrayed adequately. How could it be? For me, there seems to be a great advantage in not exposing the mystery to facts and figures, even if we believe we have the means to do so.

The American monk, Shirley Carter Hughson has said:

The mystery of Epiphany is like the light; early at dawn when the light is dim, it presents a mystery of earth and sky that is wholly lost when the sun shines in all its fullness at high noon. I remember driving across the desert in the Mid-West, and being impressed with the glory of the early morning and of the late afternoon, in comparison with the hardness of the noon-day sun.

What I think Carter Hughson is trying to share with us is the beauty and thrill of the mysterious; that the individual who never feels called to pause and wonder at something as beautiful as a pale sunrise shimmering over the Sea of Galilee or a riotous sunset exploding across the horizon of the South Downs is as good as dead.



'The Adoration of the Magi' by Hieronimus Bosch

For there is something great and full in the deep mysteries of life, which threaten to become utterly lost when life is explained away to its bare bones. The lure of the mysterious is that very element which has drawn human-kind to follow after truth; and

the fact that truth lies tantalisingly beyond us, reflects the infinite nature of God Himself, who is the very fullness of truth to those of us who believe.

On this feast of Epiphany, we come to marvel at the birth of the Christ-Child, whose divine light Isaiah prophesies will rise to shine with radiant glory upon us, making our eyes to shine and our hearts to thrill with the joy of His presence. We celebrate mystery. We celebrate God with us alongside the exotic visitors to the manger: in the sights and smells and taste and touch of the gifts they bore; of the sounds of the choirs of heavenly angels proclaiming Jesus' holy presence. We celebrate the joy and the mystery of our salvation: that God could love us so much as to send us His beloved son to die for us; knowing our faults, our frailties and our (oh so) flawless egos!



***'Adoration of the Magi' fresco at Scrovegni Chapel, Padua
by Giotto di Bondone***

This Epiphany, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may the mysterious Magi lead you to Our Lord Jesus Christ and may they impart to you something of the incomprehensible, powerful faith which sent them on their mysterious journey, and of the indescribable joy which they found when they knelt before the Lord of Heaven made man. This is the message that Robert Chelsea has found for himself; this is the joy which has fuelled him with the strength and the courage he has needed to overcome the darkness which threatened his life. May that same mysterious joy of the Epiphany be yours too. May the light and reality of Jesus' love guide us all safely through the darkness of Coronavirus. And, may you shine with His grace so that others want to come and see and know the mystery of your faith for themselves.

Yours, in the Epiphany of Christ,

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

Schedule of Services

As many of us had feared, the rate of spread of Coronavirus has been escalating exponentially, particularly through the new strain of the virus. Monday night's

announcement from our Prime Minister has underscored the need for everyone to stay at home unless absolutely essential for work, to obtain food and medicine and to exercise locally. Places of worship are being allowed to remain open, for private prayer and for services, where strict Coronavirus social-distancing regulations have been meticulously adhered to. Funerals of up to 30 people may be held, and Ashes Scatterings can also continue with up to 6 people in attendance. Weddings are permitted with up to 6 people in attendance, but only in exceptional circumstances.

COVID-19 and its mutations thrive on social contact. It feeds off social gatherings, wherever and whatever they are. The cold, hard truth is that we will not rid our nation of its deadly presence unless we act together in the ways we have been asked to do. It is my belief that, as the cornerstone of village life, the faith community in our parishes should be modelling the right way forward – observing Government regulations by not going out unless absolutely essential, and by showing a selfless concern for the other rather than adhering to corporate worship simply because we can.

Bishops Tim, David and Debbie have also put out a letter encouraging incumbents that, 'whilst churches are permitted to hold services in line with national guidance on the safe use of places of worship, clergy and PCCs should consider not doing so,' suggesting that other forms of digital worship might be offered instead.

My view has been to err on the side of caution: placing the health and well-being of our parishioners (particularly those who are at the coal-face, operating the churches and leading services) above the desire to gather in worship, however much I value doing so spiritually, and appreciate the mental-health and social benefits of being together in community. It therefore is my decision that **our parish churches should not hold Worship services during January**.

Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, and I have also recorded a **reflective non-Communion Epiphany service**. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>



[Collect Prayer for Epiphany](#)

O God, who by the leading of a star
manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth:
mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith,

may at last behold your glory face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Isaiah 60:1-6 - The Glory of Zion

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.

Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.

Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.

Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.



Matthew 2:1-12 - The Magi Visit the Messiah

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.