**Epiphany 3 2023 All Saints Bromsgrove by the Ven. Nikki Groarke**

Matthew 4:12-23

This moment in Matthew’s gospel is an epiphany moment. It’s where Jesus calls some fishermen to leave their nets and become fishers of people. It is a profound, world changing moment, when Jesus begins his public ministry, forms his team and begins to proclaim the kingdom of heaven is near. He reveals himself to those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to respond.

An *epiphany* is an experience of sudden striking and enlightening realisation which allows something to be understood from a new and deeper perspective. A light bulb moment. It is a moment of revelation, of seeing something new, or something familiar in a new way. This season of epiphany is all about the revelation of God in Jesus, about seeing Jesus the man as God, about seeing God as the man Jesus. It’s about light dawning.

The disciples and others got to walk and talk with Jesus the man. As they got to know him, they had constant new revelations of God. Jesus’ incarnation was God’s way of showing us who he is. Jesus said “when you have seen me, you have seen the father’. So what did they see? . What did they see him doing?

They saw him bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour. They saw him teaching, proclaiming good news, and curing every disease and sickness.

They saw him doing kingdom things, signs and wonders, demonstrations of care and compassion. They saw miracles – healings, deliverance, interspersed with intimate and gentle moments of encounter with hurting people, questioning people.

They saw him taking time to listen, to teach and explain, and they saw him get angry, challenging injustice, confronting hypocrites. They saw him weep over Jerusalem, crying out to his father. They saw him tired – he was confined by the limitations of a human body after all. Ultimately they saw him in anguish over his forthcoming death as he wrestled in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then they saw him die.

As they saw all this, I wonder which moments were epiphany moments for them. Did they marvel at the miracles, astonished as they saw the power of God at work, as they saw people’s lives transformed? Did they suddenly get it, suddenly understand something as Jesus explained a parable, suddenly grasp a truth about God they hadn’t seen before? Or did they ponder over the constant reminders that this was, in fact, God, but he was in a human body. A body with normal functions. Pretty mind blowing to walk with a man who is God, and see him get dehydration headaches, sun burn, tummy upsets – all the same things the rest of us get. What does that say about the God who created us? What did it show them about God’s understanding of the struggles of humanity?

Their epiphany moments of revelation would obviously be different from ours. They saw Jesus in the flesh. We read about his time on earth and experience it second hand, But through the work of the Holy Spirit we don’t read and hear the biblical accounts as we would any other book. We read and hear the bible as God’s word, living and active. If we are prepared to be open to revelation, we too can have those aha moments, when we suddenly see and understand differently. Living through this Epiphany season as part of our rhythm of church life is about giving space for this, space to encounter Jesus, to reflect on the significance of his incarnation.

History is littered with examples of people who think they are gods, but only one example of God becoming human. So throughout epiphany, we celebrate the God who became human, who became one of us, who became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood, as one translation of the opening of John’s gospel eloquently states. The God who was revealed in Christ the man, who people could see.

Christmas feels a long time past already, but I still have in my mind the slightly unusual rhyme I saw in one card:

Some people think that Christmas time

Is gifts and grub and booze;

But the best bit is

That Jesus came –

God’s own Son in human shoes!

The best bit is that Jesus came and put himself in our shoes.

That he was born and lived at the time and in the place described in the gospels is historically and archaeologically attested to, by both friendly and hostile sources. What is not so generally acknowledged is that Jesus was God’s Son, part of the God who we worship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Theologians wrestle with questions about whether it’s possible for Jesus to be fully God, and fully human, simultaneously, but this is somehow what he was. Amazingly, God himself took human form, and came to live amongst those he had created, moved into the neighbourhood.

The God who came in the form of Jesus had been promised for a long time. Prophets of the Old Testament had foretold how and where the Messiah would be born. The Jews were expecting their Messiah, their Saviour, a king who would come for them. They knew he would be born of a virgin in Bethlehem, and would be called ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace’. But they were expecting a powerful, warrior king, who would sweep in and rescue them victoriously. In the event, the God who came for them came so humbly that many of them missed him all together. They didn’t see. They didn’t have their epiphany moment,

How then did he come? When God came, he didn’t take the easy option! He went through the whole becoming human process, including birth, teething problems, stomach upsets, teenage spots, working for a living, and ultimately dying a painful death. Having decided to take on human form, he didn’t go for the cushy number of being born in a royal palace, opting rather for an ignoble birth into poverty, his teen-aged mother tainted with suspicion of illegitimacy, and started life on the run as a refugee in a foreign land. He moved into the neighbourhood. He put himself in our shoes. It was not a great start. How God came to earth is probably not the way he would have done if he’d taken the advice of today’s spin doctors and image consultants.

Jesus grew up in a normalish family, did the things the rest of us do. Most of his life was not particularly spectacular, and apart from accounts of his birth, and a mention of one childhood event, we know very little about what he did until he was thirty. Until he begins his public ministry.

When you stop to think about it, that’s pretty amazing! God himself came and lived amongst the people he’d created, and for thirty of the thirty three years he was here, he was all but ignored! He was allowed to get on with his life as a carpenter, living just like you and me. No spot lights.

But doesn’t that make him somehow more accessible? We can relate to him now as one who knows what it’s like to be a normal human being. He’s not sort of ‘up there’, unapproachable, with no experience of life at work, of life riddled with family squabbles, moral dilemmas, complex issues, pain and suffering interspersed with fun, celebrations and developing relationships. He’s been one of us, done that, got the T shirt! Worn our shoes, inhabited our ‘hood.

One writer put it like this:

 “He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.

He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenter’s shop till he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn’t go to college. He never visited a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness.

He had no credentials but himself.

He was only thirty three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of humankind’s progress. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the lives of people on earth as much as that one solitary life.”

I took some of my ‘superfluous’ Christmas gifts to the charity shop last week. At Christmas time we receive so many presents we don’t really need, while God offers us a gift we cannot do without. The gift of himself, for those with eyes to see. He couldn’t have made himself any bigger to impress us so he made himself smaller to attract us. God went to great lengths to get our attention, he came to earth as a baby for us – for you and me! He was born, grew up, put himself in our shoes, moved into the neighbourhood, and then died, for you and me.

We may be disturbed by this kind of revelation, if we think through all the implications. Perhaps it offends our sense of propriety to think of God with a runny nose and sweaty feet. We’d rather have the sanitised version – ‘little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes’. I am sure Jesus cried, and was sick, and did all the other things babies do. I am sure as he grew up he had toddler tantrums, adolescent attitudes and teenage traumas – he chose to be confined in a human body with its complex functions and hormones, and all this stuff is part of the package.

If God is ‘up there’, we don’t have to respond to him, but if he’s ‘down here’, perhaps we do! Perhaps it leads us to a personal epiphany, even if we have heard it all before. Perhaps we can, in this season, embrace the opportunity for a sudden striking and enlightening realisation which allows things to be understood from a different perspective.

Jesus the man provided a way to peace for all who believe in him, a way which brings comfort and hope to normal people with unanswered questions.

Jesus the man identified himself as a child of God, an identity which through him we can all share. Jesus the man went through the waters of baptism, publicly identifying himself as part of the people of God, what was to become, through him, the church. Jesus the man gathered people around him, kingdom people, worked with others to begin a movement to change the world.

Jesus the man, was a revelation of God himself, for those who were in spite of their scepticism, willing to come and see, and who were then given the promise that they would see greater things. Things which help us make the connection between the God man and God, to see God in the incarnate Jesus, so that we might see him in his risen glory.

In a few moments we’re going to share in communion together. Let’s use this time, as we share bread and wine, to make our own response to the God who became human, put himself in our shoes, lived and died for us, and is alive today. Let’s ask him to reveal himself to each of us in a fresh way, to hear his invitation to ‘come and see’, to join in the adventure which started with a motely group of disciples and continues in us as his kingdom people. Let’s commit to joining in with the movement Jesus came to start, as we play our part in revealing his love to those around us, inviting them to come and see, as God’ love is revealed through his church now as it was through the incarnate Jesus then.