

Christmas 2 (3rd January) & Epiphany (6th) 2021

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Jeremiah 31 vv 7-14 p791	6 th January Epiphany	Ephesians 3 vv 1-12
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Ephesians 1 vv 1-14 p1173 John 1 vv 1-18 p1063		Matthew 2 vv 1-12

ALMIGHTY God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true Circumcision of the Spirit; that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant, that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

I was disappointed that on 21st December I wasn't able to see the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. We were told that the two giant planets crossing one another's orbits from the perspective of earth would look like one bright shining star. It was suggested that maybe God used a conjunction of planets like this to let the wise men know that Christ was born in Bethlehem. As it happened, midwinter's day this year was a dull, damp day and cloud concealed the moon and the stars and the planets, as it had overcast the sun for the whole of the day. I thought to myself, "Just as well it wasn't a dull, cloudy day, when God set the star in the night sky for the wise men to observe and interpret." As a matter of fact, I have never seen the sky so clearly as I did when I was in the Holy Land. The stars shone so much more brightly than they do here in this country and several planets could be seen with the naked eye, including the red planet, Mars, and others which are not normally easily visible from England. It was quite an awe-inspiring sight. One could readily understand why the psalmist sang (Psalm 19¹): ***THE heavens declare the glory of God : and the firmament sheweth his handywork.*** I do sometimes wonder if the reason why so many people in modern Britain don't think much about God is that we live our lives so much cut off from the grandeur of Nature. When I was a child, before our atmosphere was quite so polluted with chemicals as it is now and there was far less light pollution, we were able to appreciate and to enjoy much more the beauty of the celestial bodies than we can today, but never, so far as I can remember, with the clarity I observed in the Holy Land. To think of those wise men trekking from the east, wherever that was, under those amazing skies! *And lo, the star which they saw in east went before them, till it came and stood over the place where the young child was... They rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him.*

Awe. Wonder. Joy. These are our emotions as we contemplate these things, the more so when we consider the implications of the Christian Gospel. This young child, this vulnerable baby, is also the One Who created all the heavens and the earth. Psalm 8 meditates both on the ineffable glory of God and his love for human beings: 3. *For I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers : the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained.* 4. *What is man, that thou art mindful of him : and the son of man, that thou visitest him?* Jesus fulfils both roles, fully human and fully divine.

The Light shines, but the Light shines in the darkness. Psalm 8 also includes the verse (2): *Out of the mouth of very babes and sucklings, hast thou ordained strength, because of thine enemies: that thou mightest still the enemy, and the avenger.* This is a dark world and this verse is sometimes taken as a prophecy of what King Herod did when he killed the boy babies in Bethlehem in his desperate effort to extinguish Jesus, the Light of the world. Jesus Himself, on the first Palm Sunday, quotes Psalm 8² in a slightly different form: *Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise... All glory, laud and honour to thee, Redeemer, King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.* The chief priests and the scribes

didn't like it that the children sang *Hosanna to the son of David* as Jesus, the King of Kings, meekly rode a donkey into Jerusalem acclaimed by the Passover crowds. Five days later, they would connive at His Crucifixion. It is a dark world. We can think of many examples of darkness on earth, not only in the bible, but throughout human history, and in our world today.

John 1⁵ is incredibly positive and encouragingly ambiguous: *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.* We know what *And the light shineth in darkness* means. Jesus is the Light Who shines in our darkest darkness. But what does John mean by *and the darkness comprehended it not.* The Greek word for *comprehended* is κατελαβεν. Κατελαβεν has a range of possible meanings in English. The verse could mean *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness did not overcome it.* That is, of course, true. Nothing can overcome the Light of Christ. Herod did not succeed in killing the baby Jesus. Revelation 14 is read on the Feast day of the Holy Innocents, John's vision of the virgin martyrs in heaven, bearing the Father's Name, singing God's praises in all eternity. Herod didn't ultimately destroy them either. Ultimately, evil never wins. Jesus did indeed die on Good Friday an agonising death when *from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour*, and even He, *cried with a loud voice, saying Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* And we know what happened at Easter Day and on the Day of Pentecost and that He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. No darkness, no matter how deep the darkness might be, can overcome the light. But the verse could also mean *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness did not understand it.* Darkness misses the point. People are evil because they simply do not understand that it would be so much more in their interests to be good. That is why the concepts of folly and sin are so closely linked in the bible. *The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God...The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Darkness doesn't grasp light. Darkness doesn't master the Light. Maybe, we could say, *Darkness just doesn't get it.*

Jeremiah rejoices in the triumph of the Light when God redeems His chosen people and brings them home with joy. Paul is almost overwhelmed with the wonder of it all, that God's victory over the darkness incorporates all the nations, not just the Jews, but all the nations. This is God's eternal plan for each one of us whom he is calling. The Spirit He has given us is both a foretaste and a guarantee of the heavenly light which is ours in Christ both now and in all eternity.

Paul can hardly believe that a sinner like him is entrusted with a treasure like this to share with the whole of the world. But he was and so are we. It is our treasure too, ours to share with the whole world. *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.