



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**26 January 2020: Choral Eucharist**

**The Third Sunday of Epiphany**

**Isaiah 9:1–4, I Corinthians 1:10–18, Matthew 4:12–23**

**The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor**

**‘Glimpses of God’**

Kingfisher. All you can do is  
Be where he is likely to appear, and  
Wait.  
Often, nothing much happens;  
There is space, silence and  
Expectancy.  
No visible sign, only the  
Knowledge that he’s been there  
And may come again.  
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,  
You have been prepared.  
But when you’ve almost stopped  
Expecting it, a flash of brightness  
Gives encouragement.

*Anne Lewin*

That beautiful poem by Anne Lewin draws us to a central mystery of this season of Epiphany – glimpsing God, waiting on that ‘flash of brightness’, a moment of encounter with Father, Son and Spirit.

As some of you will know, I’m nothing like the keen bird-watcher my wife is. I lack the patience to sit in hides for hours on end. I’m far more excited by owls and raptors than with the countless LBJs or ‘little brown jobbies’ that make-up so much of British wildlife. Nonetheless I’ve had two encounters with kingfishers in the wild – one a fleeting glimpse of iridescent colour, brief but unmistakable, as it flashed past in the grounds of a Travelodge near Winchester. The other felt more miraculous, stumbling upon a kingfisher here at Christ Church as I walked round the meadow and back up the path

between the river and the little stream. It sat there in all its expected glory, watching the waters and reeds; in no rush, even as it spotted me in all my bumbling clumsiness. It seemed to look deep into me, before returning its gaze to the ripples of the water. I stopped, enraptured, until the bird finally flitted away; and returned home uplifted, feeling graced by a perfect moment of glorious and unexpected presence.

Epiphany is a season of such glimpses. It's the time of the Church year that reminds us that God is there to be encountered in this world of Brexit and climate emergency, in the remembrance of the Shoah, in the discussions of Davos, and in all the nitty-gritty of the everyday. It reminds us how to look and where to see. Our Gospel reading points us to a three-fold encounter – the glory to be seen in the Scriptures, as Isaiah's great prophecy to Zebulun and Naphtali is fulfilled, 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light' (Mt. 4:16; Is. 9:2); the glory to be seen in Jesus himself, the incarnate Son of God, revealed not just in the great mysteries of the adoration of the magi, his baptism, the wedding at Cana but in his preaching and teaching, in his daily life in Galilee; and the glory to be seen in his disciples, those whom he calls from their fishing nets to follow him, Simon and Andrew, James and John – lives transformed in a moment by a simple call, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people' (Mt. 4:19).

It can be easy to suppose that such glimpses of God are far beyond us, lost in the mists of time on a Galilaeen sea-shore or reserved for a privileged mystic few, whose experience of God and the world is completely 'other'. But God never stops speaking, never stops acting, never stops revealing himself. What was seen and heard then in Galilee is the key to unlocking the truth of what is seen and heard today – as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

For God is a God who always speaks, always encounters, who calls us daily to glimpse his grace. And yet so much of the time for so many of us, we fail to see, fail to hear, too focused on 'mending our nets' (Mt. 4:21) to know who or what is in our midst.

I remember back when I was young, going on caravan holidays to the beach at Walton-on-the-Naze. I used to love charging through the waves, digging holes in the sand, but one day I noticed a boy picking carefully through the pebbles and preciously setting aside small, black, pointed objects. Overcome with fascination, I went and asked what he was doing and he explained that he was collecting fossilized shark's teeth, millions of years old, washed up on the shore. I was amazed. Surely this was something only found in

museums or by geologists with special hammers and years of training. But no, the young lad showed me – telling me what to look for, training my eyes and fingers to look for the distinctive shape, the particular feel. At first it took me ages to find one myself but over the years, it became easier and easier; to the point that these tiny prehistoric wonders seemed to leap out at me, unmissably calling out from their spots between shells, minerals and sand.

Our glimpsing of God can be the same. We need others to help us recognise God in the world around us, in the mess of our daily lives; to help us know what's of God because it's Christ-shaped, until we start to see the Christ-shaped-ness of everything. And this is a job not just for priests or academic theologians but for all of us – to tell our stories, to share how we have glimpsed God in work or at home, in moments of joy and celebration but also in times of sickness, suffering and despair.

God in the everyday. God in the ordinary. For all that I love the Anne Lewin poem, it can make it seem like that glimpsing God is something as unlikely, fleeting and uncertain as stumbling upon a kingfisher. There is a truth in that which says something of us and our response. But it needs balancing with another perspective, something Rowan Williams puts well. He says, "Prayer is like sunbathing... When you're lying on the beach or under the lamp, something is happening, something that has nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You simply have to be there where the light can get at you."

God is there to be glimpsed, ready to be encountered in Word, in sacrament, in the faces of one another, in every moment of the time and space that he made and sustains and enters into for or sake. So let us be as expectant as watching for a kingfisher, as patient as sunbathers resting in the light and above all let us encourage one another to glimpse our God.