



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

5 January 2020: Choral Eucharist

The Second Sunday of Christmas

Jeremiah 31:7–14, Ephesians 1:3–14, John 1:10–18

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‘The work of Christmas begins...with Epiphany’

This is the second Sunday of Christmas. We don't always get one – it depends where in the week Christmas falls – and often, I think, we'd rather not have one. By now, we've done Christmas. We're back to work, or back to routines, or back to normal life. The little burst of extra cards and parcels that appeared on the 27th, 28th, 29th December has stopped (or maybe it's only my friends who don't post things until the last minute?) We've come home from being away, or waved our family off, with some regret but also relief. Only the blue Quality Street is left in the tin. The tree really ought to come down – it's been shedding for days. The decorations are an embarrassing remnant.

So the insistence on keeping a second Sunday of Christmas seems perverse. We are quite good, in church, at insisting on keeping Advent – we are much less good at insisting on keeping the full 12 days of Christmas. But I think the two are connected. Insisting that Christmas doesn't start until darkness falls on Christmas Eve is not just correct, or traditional – it's about fully acknowledging the darkness of our world, into which God speaks the promise of a Saviour. If we don't allow Advent to be Advent, the promise of the Saviour loses its importance. The birth of Jesus, light of the world, only makes sense if we have acknowledged the darkness.

But if we have kept Advent faithfully, we also need to keep Christmas faithfully – for the whole twelve days, for the whole two Sundays if we have them. Because otherwise we reduce its importance. We can often be more comfortable with fasting than feasting; with denying than affirming; with saying 'it's not Christmas yet' than saying 'yes, Christmas continues.' But, just like Advent, that affirmation needs to have content. We need to proclaim that we keep the whole twelve days of Christmas because the wonder and mystery of the incarnation deserves time to reflect on it; because God's gift in Christ is, above all, freedom; and freedom means freedom to feast, to revel, to enjoy. Those of you who were at Midnight Mass heard Canon Ward preach about Christmas as the deepest magic. He said:

“The enchantment is real. The enchantment is true. Be generous. Be liberal. Be festive. Decorate your halls and homes with glittering lights, holly and mistletoe. String your cards and hang your crepe-paper streamers. But understand the power of the magic at work here; its source in God, its end in God: God in and God with us.”

Wonder. Magic. Enchantment. Mystery. God in and God with us. That is Christmas. God gives us, freely, Jesus; and God gives us the grace of human time in which we can enjoy, appreciate, seek to enter into that wonder and magic and mystery. The Second Sunday of Christmas, and all our readings seek in their own way to give us a glimpse of what it means to revel in that wonder and glory and joy; to see the grace and truth of God revealed in Jesus.

But though God gives us the wonder and the grace and the time to appreciate it, to pause and to revel and to feast, God also calls us not to stop there. Liturgical time moves on and moves in cycles: Christmas into Epiphany into Lent into Easter into Ordinary Time into Advent into Christmas again... and that's important. Liturgical time is shaped by the natural rhythms of the seasons and the human rhythms of birth and death – and by Jesus' human life of birth and death. Jesus' birth is meaningful because it's part of his life, his death, his resurrection. Christmas is meaningful as one part in the great cycle of liturgical time. And in that cycle, Christmas moves into Epiphany.

Christmas into Epiphany.

Birth into Revealing.

Revelry, a joyous pause, into something longer and more sustainable.

Epiphany is both the same and different; its own season and part of Christmas; continuing to meditate on the wonder of the incarnation, on who Jesus is as God with us, but thinking not just about Jesus born, but about Jesus revealed in his early life and ministry.

And this too is important. Liturgical time is right to take us forward into a season that says, not just who Jesus is, but why and how he is revealed to be God with us. A season that asks more of us than just to stop and rest: a season that shows us Jesus the adult, Jesus called by his Father, calling his disciples, transforming water into wine; a season that calls us to new action.

We'll anticipate this season (by a day!) at the end of this service, when the Sub Dean will bless chalk for the traditional Epiphany house blessings. You are invited to take chalk and a blessing card home and to chalk a blessing on the lintel of your front door – praying for your house and your household, your extended family and friends. It's a blessing for the year ahead; it comes from the idea of the Magi journeying to find the child Jesus, and it draws

Christmas into Epiphany. Blessing our house, our family, ourselves for the year ahead reminds us that the birth of Christ resonates beyond Christmas Day, beyond the twelve days of Christmas. The birth of Christ is worth celebrating, pausing with, revelling in precisely because its importance resonates into the new year and into the whole of life. The birth of Christ is important because Jesus is important, and Jesus is important because Jesus is revealed – in Epiphany – as God with us, the glory of God dwelling in our midst, God meeting human beings in grace and mercy and blessing.

Jesus, whose birth resonates through history, is blessing. And blessing with a purpose: to make us into a blessing for the world. The darkness we acknowledged in Advent remains, but Jesus shines into the darkness, and calls us to shine too. Advent last year felt, to me, darker than any Advent I remember; and even this Christmas season has been full of darkness. Wildfires in Australia. Threats of war in the Middle East. Illness. Death.

The darkness is real; but into the darkness comes the light of Christ, the twelve days of Christmas inviting us to step out into the joy of the Incarnation, rest and refreshment and light. But – rested, refreshed, enlightened – now we are sent back: into normality, into Epiphany, into God's call to participate in the revealing of Christ in the world, to be the blessing of Christ to all people. The poem by Howard Thurman puts it well:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

Blessing is given to us for a purpose: to do the work of Christmas. Our blessing is to participate in the abundant love of God, shown supremely in Jesus: who became human so that we too can be truly human, and work in compassion for the healing of the world. Our

blessing is to become a blessing to those around us who are lost, broken, hungry; not because we are better, but because we are called.

So, tomorrow, the work of Christmas begins. Claim the blessing of Christmas: the twelve days of feasting physically and spiritually on mystery, wonder, and joy. Bless your homes with Epiphany chalk. Because you need blessing to be a blessing. And you are called to be a blessing. To do the work of Christmas. To find and heal, feed and rebuild, bring peace and make music. To be God's love, sent out to bring hope.