

Epiphany Sunday

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on January 5, 2025

Isaiah 60:1-6 / Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 / Ephesians 3:1-12 / Matthew 2:1-12

*Arise, shine, for your light has come.
The Glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

Happy Epiphany. Here we are celebrating The Epiphany on 12th Night – tomorrow, January 6, is the actual Feast of The Epiphany. The end of the 12 Days of Christmas, 12 Drummers Drumming, the 12 points of doctrine in the Apostles Creed.

As part of our celebration of The Epiphany, we will finish today's worship with "*We 3 Kings of Orient Are*". But, were they kings and were there 3? The NRSV translates "*μαγοι [magoi]*" as "*wise men*", and the text doesn't offer a number of *μαγοι*. The number is assumed by the number of gifts they brought. *Μαγοι* is related to the Old Persian "*magush*", or priest. So, the only part of "*We 3 Kings of Orient Are*" that is verifiable is "*of Orient Are*" – they were from the East.

For some reason, these *μαγοι* were compelled to make the journey to see Jesus. In their encounter with King Herod, their journey suddenly became a dangerous one. But they pressed on because their journey was the epiphany that this baby boy in Bethlehem was the Messiah.

If the *μαγοι* were Persian priests, they would not have known or followed the God of Israel. Why were they there to pay homage? Their gifts were a clear indication that they knew Jesus to be the Messiah: Gold for His royal role, Frankincense for His priestly role, and Myrrh for His sacrificial role. They were drawn into a story that wasn't intended to be theirs. But God has a funny way of using outsiders to accomplish divine activities.

The story of the Visit of the Magi is testimony to God's Radical Inclusivity – or even the Radical Inclusivity of the writers of scripture. The OT is the story of the People of Israel, exclusively. It's about them and their relationship with YHWH. However, throughout the Old Testament, non-Jewish people play roles in the transformation and salvation of the People of Israel.

The NT is the exclusive story of the early followers of Jesus and the initiation and continuation of the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers. Yet, there are many in these accounts who are not explicitly followers of Jesus.

Each of these characters have their own epiphany as they encounter the Living God. What their stories – however brief – have in common are:

- *God's radical inclusivity*
- *Dangerous journeys*
- *And personal transformation*

If, today, we want to learn and grow from this story, then we must ask ourselves:

How can I be a part of God's Radical Inclusivity? Is it a dangerous journey?

And am I open to being transformed by this encounter with Jesus?

I'm going to use the Church as my talking point. I've been on staff at 2 Lambeth Conferences. The Lambeth Conference is held approximately every 10yrs – barring a world war or global pandemic – and is the gathering of all the Bishops within the Anglican Communion. It is hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the spiritual head of the autonomous provincial churches that make up our global denomination. For 2½ weeks we get to see church leadership at both its best and its worst!

A founding principle of Anglicanism, and affirmed by successive Lambeth Conferences, is that we have common prayer with local expression. If you go to

any Anglican parish church around the world, 99% of the time, you will know exactly what is going on despite the local language being spoken. When the Bishops gather for the Lambeth Conference, daily worship is spoken in the language of whichever Province (or country) is leading the worship. If someone doesn't have an interpreter – which is all of the English-speaking folks – you just get on with it...you relax into the worship and know that proper prayers are being said on your behalf even if you don't understand them.

The way daily worship is done at the Lambeth Conferences were occasions of Radical Inclusivity. And for me, there were moments of transformation as I encountered Jesus in that worship. They were not cataclysmic transformations, but my relationship with God deepened because I let myself be taken on a journey that I wasn't necessarily in control of.

But the Lambeth Conferences from the mid-20C to present have also been shining examples of Radical *Exclusivity*. It will be a surprise to no one here that these Conferences have highlighted the divisions in inclusivity based on race, gender and sexuality and gender identity. Let's start with 1998. And note that I am speaking from my own experiences as staffer, and not as either a Bishop or investigative journalist.

At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, race, gender and sexuality were front and center: all 3!

- It was the first time that *all* Bishops were invited. Previously it was only Diocesan Bishops. But the complaint was that The Episcopal Church, being so geographically large, had well over 100 Diocesan Bishops but no more in the pews than the Church of England with its 44 Diocesan Bishops. And even more stark were the African Dioceses which were not only geographically very large within much smaller countries, but they had millions of more members, requiring more Suffragan or Assistant Bishops who were previously not invited. With the invitation of *all* Bishops to the 1998 Conference, for the first time in the history of this global church borne out of colonization, the majority of Bishops were not only Black, but from

the Global South. And their wives were there, too, for the first ever Spouses Programme, hosted by the ABC's wife.

- Not only was this the first majority-Black Conference, it was the first Conference attended by *women* Bishops! There were 11 women Bishops from around the globe. What a joyous historical occasion! For some! Not for all!
- And what was at the top of the legislative agenda? Human Sexuality: Resolution 1.10:

We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;

And then, without taking a breath:

While rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, [This Conference] calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals.

So close yet so far from Radical Inclusion.

So, what happens over the next 10yrs?

- The Episcopal Church consecrates a gay Bishop in a same-sex marriage. He doesn't get an invitation to the 2008 Conference.
- More women are consecrated as Bishops in more provinces.
- More doctrinal outrage is manifested.
- And it all gets blamed on the people with dark skin!
- But no unhelpful resolutions are passed at the 2008 Conference.

So, the 2022 Lambeth Conference comes around. (*Long story of why it wasn't in 2018.*) What?!?!? The Church of England approved women bishops in 2015? How could the Mother Church do such a thing? Oh...I see...they have an out-clause. A parish who does not want oversight from a woman bishop can ask for a different Bishop! Phew! Integrity restored! *And now* there are more gay bishops! They get invited, but guess what: their spouses do not get invitations to participate in the Spouses Programme. Lots of exclusion, and we're still blaming the ones with dark skin.

I air the dirty laundry of the Anglican Communion for two reasons:

1. It shows that even at the highest level, we struggle to live as Jesus taught us to.
2. And, actually, as a global denomination, we *are* engaging in the *dangerous* journey to demonstrate the Radical Inclusivity of God and to be transformed. It's not an easy journey for anyone!

We're human, and it's tough to be in relationship with another person, another group, another culture. We haven't come anywhere close to the inclusion and transformation expressed in today's Gospel story of the Visit of the Magi. Nowhere close, because we don't want to embark on the difficult journey. Also, we're human, and we want to make God in *our own* image, rather than see the Image of God in others who are not like us. That's not a dynamic just among conservatives. *We all* tend to make God in our own image. That gets in the way of healthy relationships.

Relationships are two-way: If you want me to meet you where *you are*, you also have to meet me where *I am*, or it's not going to work. That was part of the difficult journey that the Magi embarked on: Persian priests encountered the Jewish Messiah. The mutual inclusivity of those of different cultures no doubt led to transformation. And to be fair to the 2008 and 2022 Lambeth Conferences, the Bishops started that hard work of meeting one another where they are, of journeying toward Radical Inclusivity with starkly different cultural backgrounds, and being open to transformation. I can share my experiences of that from 2008, and Bishop Lucinda can share her experiences of that from 2022.

As Episcopalians, we are not a perfect Church, nor will we ever be. But The Church: It is not the institution; it is the People who are the Body of Christ, the Church. And we, God's people, are the ones who will make a difference in the lives of *more* of God's people, by taking the arduous journey to practice God's Radical Inclusivity and allowing ourselves to be transformed by our encounters with Jesus and by seeking and serving Christ in all persons.

We can't put the toothpaste back into the tube. But there are many in positions of power in this country who want to do just that. They want to systematically marginalize, eradicate or make lives difficult for people who don't fit their model of a person or whom they refuse to understand. As Christians, we must move forward on the journey of Radical Inclusivity and be safe refuge, even if it seems too difficult. We have to start that Radical Inclusivity as individuals:

- *Not all Americans have white skin, and they're still Americans. If you ask them what their "nationality" is and they say "American", take that as your clue that you're being intrusive not inquisitive.*
- *Not all immigrants are ignorant or dangerous. Just the billionaire ones.*
- *Some people use pronouns that you wouldn't use for them. Well, get used to it; try harder; it's not about you; it's about them and who they are.*
- *If you're wondering about someone's suitability for a leadership position, it better be about their skills and abilities. If it's not, then check your privilege.*

There is so much more to Radical Inclusivity than I can't fit into this sermon. But get on that journey. Along the journey, you will be transformed: transformed by the Radically Inclusive Love of Jesus Christ.

It doesn't matter if they were kings or if there were 3. What matters is that we learn from their story. We, too, need to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and then embark on the perilous journey toward the practice of God's Radical Inclusivity and be transformed by our encounter with Jesus. The world really can be a better place, but it's up to you to keep following the star.