

Epiphany Sunday: “Striking Appearance”

Welcome to Epiphany Sunday 2021, and what a year we have in store. Today let us refocus on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The message has been inspired by the words of Tony Tench and of course Holy Spirit.

Let us pray:

Eternal God, creator of all, Saviour to all, Lord of all, your love and power encompasses all things and all people. There is no one beyond the reach of your redeeming love. We thank you that in all countries there are witnesses to your gospel, bearing testimony through their words and actions to the good news of Jesus Christ.

We thank you for Your church in each place, for Your Spirit equipping it with gifts and empowering Your people to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. We thank You for Christian partnership across continents and national boundaries, for those who have responded to Your call to serve the church in a land that is not their own. Grant that we may be worthy of this great company of saints, ready to witness and serve in the name of Jesus, the light of the world. Amen.

Our message this morning is from **2 Timothy 1:6-10**

‘Paul an apostle of Christ by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of hands. Amen.

Today is Epiphany Sunday on the Christian Calendar. The Gospel of Matthew records the scenes of the Magi’s, the Three Wise Men’s, journey following the star that “appeared” to lead them to the new-born Jesus. The word Epiphany means just that, Appearing suddenly, a sudden thought or idea. The “appearing” of the star, which led the Wise Men to witness the Ultimate Appearance of God; coming into the world in human flesh, is remembered each year on Epiphany Sunday. Of course, over time the word “epiphany” has come to be

used whenever we receive a sudden, striking realisation about something, we have an “epiphany”, we see the answer to that problem clearly, as I said earlier.

But at the heart of the word and its use in Scripture and Church History is a place, a time, a word, a way in which God shows up! And, most specifically, God’s appearance to us in Jesus! After the Magi had followed the appearance of the star to Jesus, God gently warned them not to return to King Herod (he had violence in mind). So, the text says that they left for their country by another way, they took a different route home. But, as J.C. Howell has remarked, **“You can imagine Matthew winking a little, hoping we will notice his subtle cue about what life is like once we’ve met Jesus. Nothing is the same!”** Yes, they went ANOTHER WAY HOME from Bethlehem, they went home changed.

The appearance of Jesus’ birth changed them. His appearance is also meant to change us as well! This Epiphany, the appearance of Jesus, inaugurated a universal blessing. Jesus comes to the insiders, the chosen ones, by being born of the house and lineage of David. He came as a blessing to Israel, But, also, the star appearing to the Eastern Magi, along with the shelter given to Jesus and his family by neighbouring Egypt as they fled Herod’s violence.

These indicators are important for us to understand, this appearance is meant to be a blessing to outsiders, as well as the insiders. This was for the whole world to see and sit up and take notice. This is a ‘Striking Appearance’ in the birth of one baby, every people (the ‘in’ crowd and ‘out’ crowd) encounter the presence of God himself. And we, like the Magi walk another way through our days as a result of his presence, God’ with us. Paul refers to this Appearing in 2 Timothy as he writes to encourage a young church planter saying,

“God’s grace has now been revealed through the appearing (the Epiphany) of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.” 2 Tim. 1:10

That is the Striking Appearance we proclaim and celebrate as the Church of Jesus Christ. It is because all people, cultures, backgrounds, Jews, Gentiles must deal with death as the ultimate enemy to the human experience. So, notice the striking thing in this appearance, as Paul describes it: In Jesus, death has met its Match! Death is destroyed, life and Immortality come into view, we can focus on God’s kingdom that lasts forever.

And, since death is our ultimate enemy, and since in Jesus it is destroyed, then there is nothing to distract us from the living the life God intends for us! **BOOM! That is our Epiphany!** We are set free to live the Christ life. If the greatest enemy has been destroyed, then there is simply nothing else that can hold us back! With real life exposed and accessible then, yes, we have to return Another Way ourselves. Because of the Striking Appearance of Jesus defeating death, we are to become a Striking Appearance of Jesus’ power in our world today, and that’s the Epiphany that our neighbours need to see in us. How can this happen? Paul describes it well in the verses I read earlier 2 Timothy 1:6-10:

1. Be consumed by God's desire for you!

"I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands."

The gift? Life in its fullest, not distracted by death or any other hindrance. If death is defeated, then nothing should hold us back. Fan into flame the life and be consumed by it, all day long. In decisions made, in relationships nurtured, in direction planned, in goals formed, fan it! Carl F. H. Henry once remarked, **"The early Christians did not say, 'What has this world come to.' They proclaimed, 'Look who has come into the world.'"**

This is the proclamation that is to consume our lives as we fan the gift of life into flame and become the Striking Appearance of the power of God in this world. Not timid, but with power and love and self-discipline to this end.

2. Be bold enough to burn for Jesus 'come what may.'

Paul describes (vv. 8-9) that suffering came his way because he was consumed by the Lord. We have to expect it as well. If we live the holy life he describes, "set apart" to burn for God, then we have to be ready for any suffering, rejection, or discouragement that may come. Remember the Magi's story. God appeared to the outsiders, the not-so-chosen-ones, and led them to Jesus. We become God's Striking Appearance in our community when we do the same. But that will not always be acceptable to some and we will need to be bold enough to burn for Jesus when we get rejection! We live in a very divided world these days and perhaps the best thing we can do is to reach across the divisions with the grace of God!

Our prejudices will try to keep us from that reach.

They will try to prevent us from being a people who want to reach out across the divide.

We may not be well-received because of the gap in the divide is too great, but just as God reached beyond the chosen ones of Israel to appear to the Magi in the east, so He plans to work through us to reach across modern-day divides by His grace!

This is what is needed for us today, and we are the ones who need to do it; if we are bold enough to burn for Jesus and share His grace.

Conclusion:

So, yes, on this Epiphany Sunday, the Striking Appearance of Jesus is literally meant to create the Striking Appearance of Jesus in us! His appearance destroyed death, our greatest enemy. Now, we are free to be consumed by Jesus and change the parts of the world we touch. And this is the epiphany our world is waiting for. As the Unicorn says it in C.S. Lewis' **The Last Battle: "This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it until now."**

We live in a world hungry for life as it is supposed to be, and many will look for it all their lives. Jesus appeared to show us what that life looks like and set us free to live it. It is up to us to fan into flame His life in us. Such a revival is the epiphany need in the UK and the World in 2021, Lord, help us! Amen!

Let us Pray....

Beckoning God, who called the rich to travel towards poverty, the wise to embrace your folly, the powerful to know their frailty; who gave to strangers a sense of home – coming in an alien land; and to star gazers true light and vision as they bowed to earth; we lay ourselves open to your signs for us. Stir us with Holy discontent over a world which gives its gifts to those who have plenty already, whose talents are obvious, whose power is recognised; and help us both to share our resources with those who have little and to receive with humility the gifts they bring to us. Rise with us like a star and make us restless till we journey forth to seek our rest in you. Amen