

Sunday 4 January – Epiphany

Sermon by Wendy Borgartz

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Are you inside or outside?

We are going to play a short game this morning, please bear with me and take part. It's called Inside or Outside. I am going to ask a question and if you meet the criterion I set I want you to come up to the front and stand near me. If you are standing at the front, you are part of the group. If not, if you don't meet the criterion I set, then you are not part of the group.

So my first group is a group that likes eating sprouts. I have chosen you to be my 'in' group. Anyone who likes to eat sprouts please come and stand out the front here with me. *(Pause for people to move)*.

So, this group of people standing here beside me are on the inside. They are the chosen ones. They can taste different varieties of sprouts to decide which is best. They can talk about how delicious sprouts are and share recipes for them. They understand each other's love for sprouts. The rest of us, including me as I hate sprouts, are on the outside. We can't be part of the group because we don't like sprouts. *(Send people back to their seats)*.

The second group I have chosen to be my 'in' group is people with long hair. So, anyone with long hair, please come and join me out the front here. *(Pause for people to move)*.

This group of people out the front are on the inside, they are the chosen ones. They can share together about how to keep their hair in good condition. They can recommend to one another good hair products. They understand each other's love for long hair. The rest of us, including me again as you can clearly see from my short hair, are on the outside. We can't be part of this group because our hair isn't long enough. *(Send people back to their seats)*.

This was a very silly game, a game about who is on the inside and who is on the outside of the group. But we often do play that game in real life, we behave as if some people are insiders and some are outsiders. Children can have a group of friends in the playground and won't let anyone new join in their game because they are different or perhaps are new to the school.

In our offices and colleges, we can exclude people from conversations or social events because they aren't the same as us. We can even play the game in church and not welcome people who are new or those who like to worship differently from us. I hope we have taken steps as a church family not to be like that, but it is always something we need to be aware of so that we always have a warm welcome for newcomers or have the grace to accept that different people enjoy different songs or services or ways of worship to us, because we are all individuals. Some of you may have enjoyed playing my game at the start of this talk, some of you I suspect hated it, some of you didn't really mind one way or another – as I said we are all individually made.

But God really isn't like that at all, he doesn't have favourites or an 'in' crowd and an 'out' crowd, He loves all of us equally and He wants to invite everyone into His family. Everyone who accepts Jesus into their life is automatically included.

As we have just heard in the Gospel reading this morning, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, God revealed to some men who weren't Jewish that the Messiah, God's chosen King, had been born. These men, and we don't really know how many of them there were, we assume three because of the three gifts they gave to the baby Jesus, and we don't really know exactly who they were – the Bible calls them magi or wise men, some call them Kings. But we do know that they travelled a very long way to find Jesus, following the star.

When they found Jesus, the Bible tell us that:

“they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11)

Prophets like Isaiah had been predicting for centuries the coming of the Messiah to the Israelites. At that time, the Jewish people thought that when the Messiah came, they would be the 'in' ones, those promised a place in God's kingdom. After all, they were the people God caused Moses to lead out of Egypt to the promised land, they were God's chosen people going right back to Abraham and the covenant God made involving circumcision for all men as a sign of inclusion. The Messiah was supposed to be for their

redemption again, and everyone who was not Jewish would continue to be on the outside.

But God guided the wise men to the baby Jesus, men who were clearly not Jewish. God had a far bigger plan than the Jewish people were expecting from 'their' Messiah. God's plan was to create one big family of people who loved and worshipped Jesus, from both Jews and non-Jews, those called Gentiles in the Bible. God wanted to create one big family where everyone could be on the inside if they wanted to be on the inside, a big family where nobody was excluded or made to feel unwelcome or unwanted. As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians 3:6

"the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

We have all chosen to be here today, in church, worshipping God together. We have all chosen to be part of God's family, we are all fellow-heirs alongside Christ of God's love, promises and faithfulness to us. Our task is to make sure that, just as God has welcomed all of us into his family, we are willing to welcome new people and to accept those who have answered the call of God, whether they worship in the same way as us or not. And it is a welcome we need to give to people not just in church, but to the thousands of other people in our villages who do not feel they are part of God's family, who maybe do not know God at all. As Paul also writes this time in his letter to the Romans 10:14:

"how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"

I pray that it is a task that we may all have the courage and strength to take up. Amen