

ADDRESS**31 December 2017****Epiphany**

Isaiah 60.1-6	The dispersed gathered in	
Psalms 72. 1-7, 10-14	Prayer for the king	[Ephesians 3.1-12 Ministry to the Gentiles]
Matthew 2. 1-12	The visit of the Magi	

Grant O Lord, that as the wise men found Jesus in the house of the holy family, so we may find him in your holy word, and keep him in our homes and in our hearts. AMEN

We are celebrating the Epiphany a few days early this year, because there is so much else to celebrate at this time. I wonder how many of us received Christmas cards with a picture of the three wise men on them. Three kings in fine robes with crowns on their heads, riding alone across the desert in their richest robes on the finest camels. Or offering their gifts to the baby in the manger

The answer might be none, because the story of the visit of the magi is not actually a Christmas story— the gospel makes it clear that the magi arrived in Bethlehem anything up to two years after the birth of Jesus. Late in the 2nd century one of the early fathers of the church imagined that the magi were kings; it's powerful symbolism – kings of the earth paying tribute to the King of heaven. The popular 19thC American carol we have just sung embodies the myth. *We three kings of Orient are*, but they aren't, they weren't -- the magi were wise men, men of wisdom and knowledge rather than men of authority. They were astrologers, men who followed the stars.

The magi probably came from Persia, far to the east of Judaea, and in those days of poor communications, news travelled very slowly, so it would have been many months before the magi heard about the birth of the king of the Jews. They then had to prepare for the long and difficult journey across the desert, across the contested frontier between the Parthian empire and the Roman empire, and the journey would have taken many more months.

The magi followed a star which they had seen in the East until it stopped over the house in which the child was living. A house, not a stable, nor a cave. A child, not a baby nor an infant. New Testament Greek, like English, has three distinct words. As always, we need to stay close to the Gospel story and ignore 2 000 years of pious and commercial accretions. Then we come closer to understanding the true significance of the story, and why Matthew recorded it. Here are Gentiles making a long journey to worship the king of the Jews – centuries of racial and religious exclusivity are being broken down. The knowledge of the one God, creator and redeemer and judge, is about to break out of its Jewish swaddling clothes.

Matthew is the only gospel writer to record the visit -- his is the gospel written from a Jewish viewpoint for a Jewish audience. His aim was to convince his fellow Jews that Jesus was the messiah foretold in the Old Testament. His Jewish readers would have been familiar with the

various references in the Jewish Scriptures to the magi, the wise men, the astrologers of ancient royal courts. The book of Daniel tells us about the magi who attended King Cyrus of Persia – we are told that when the king needed advice and information he found that Daniel, the young Jewish captive, was 10 times better than the best of them. (Daniel 1.20). And the book of Esther, which also comes from the period of the Jewish exile, tells us of the seven sages of Persia and Media who attended and advised King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, one of Cyrus's successors. (Esther 1.15).

So, among other things, Matthew is telling us that the wisdom of God as well as the promises of God are embodied in the child of Bethlehem. And that the gift of God in Jesus is for all people, for Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the point St Paul is making in the epistle set for today, which we did not read: from the 3rd chapter of the letter to the Ephesians – *The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in Christ Jesus through the Gospel*. The Gentiles are no longer outsiders -- there are no outsiders.

Over the centuries, the story of the magi has become part of popular mythology as well as part of the Christmas story. As one example, around 50 years ago, I was sent around Australia as part of an industry campaign to lobby governments and motoring organisations to make it compulsory to fit seat belts in cars and trucks, and for drivers and passengers to use them. No other country had done this and there was a lot of opposition. When I arrived at Parliament House in Perth, I was greeted with, *another bloomin' wise man from the east*. I was an outsider.

Tradition says that there were three wise men – one recently-discovered ancient manuscript which claims to be the magi's own account of the journey, says there were 12. Matthew does not tell us how many there were, or how many servants and interpreters and other attendants came with them, but he tells us that they brought three gifts. A few weeks ago I bought a little Epiphany box to show the residents in the nursing homes I visit – it's a small box containing samples of the three gifts, very small samples, because they were very expensive gifts.

In the gospel, the gifts are listed in order of their value at the time, by weight. Firstly, **gold**, the symbol of royal authority and wealth: the magi had come to pay homage to a king. A little more expensive than gold was **frankincense**, the basis of the incense burned in the temple as a sacrificial and prayerful offering to God. These two gifts, gold and frankincense, are the ones mentioned in today's reading from the prophecy of Isaiah. This is a prophecy which looks past the time of the exile, past the time of Jesus, past our own time, and foretells the glory of the last times when the whole creation will proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Matthew tells us that the magi offered a third, an even more expensive gift, a gift which was then worth seven times its weight in gold, but it was an ominous gift: **myrrh** is a precious spice which

was often used in embalming a body for burial, as well as in anointing a king. The magi had come to worship a king who was destined for a gruesome death.

We are not told what happened to these gifts; some scholars suggest that the holy family would have used the gold coins to pay for their hurried trip to Egypt to escape the fury of Herod, after he discovered the wise men had tricked him. How else could a young peasant couple afford such a long and arduous trip? Again, pious tradition adds to the gospel story – we are told that the holy family travelled around Egypt for four years accompanied by miracles of many kinds. Today tourists can visit churches and shrines which are said to mark places where they stayed. Some of these sites have infant hand prints or footprints in the stone which are said to be miraculous testimony to the visit of the holy child; some trees are bent over in a curious shape, because, we are told, they sheltered Mary from the sun; and some of the springs in the desert are said to have healing properties because they quenched the thirst of the holy family 2 000 years ago.

Perhaps. The Gospel simply records that, led by God, Joseph took his wife and child to Egypt and returned after the death of Herod and made his home in Nazareth of Galilee, beyond the reach of Herod's son Archelaus. The rest is pious speculation.

So, as we look ahead to another new year, what can the unadorned story of the visit of the Magi tell us about how to make it a truly happy new year, a spiritually prosperous new year?

Firstly, as I've said, it is about **inclusion**. Our epiphany comes when we realise that In Christ there are no outsiders. So we need to make sure that our churches are inclusive, that we invite everyone to come, and welcome everyone who comes, even people who aren't like us, people who don't share our interests and our concerns, people who don't have the same tastes in music, or in politics, or in worship styles; people whose theology is different, even people we find hard to like but whom Jesus makes it possible to love. Now St Mark's is good at inclusion, you notice the difference when you visit some other parishes, but we still need to take care that we don't divide into two distinct communities, that we don't spend all our time with the same few people each Sunday, and that we look around for newcomers and others to make sure they are being included.

Australia itself is becoming more inclusive – last year we welcomed more than 245 000 migrants from more than 20 countries. Just over a third came from India and China. We are no longer 'white Australia'. We also welcomed thousands of new residents from New Zealand, who don't count as migrants, because they live nearby, and we have fought together in so many wars. We even have the same flag, well, almost. For hundreds of years churches sent missionaries overseas to convert the heathen; now the so-called heathen are coming to us, and we are producing plenty of our own. So every suburb is a mission field and every believer is called to be a missionary.

Christians are called to set the example of inclusion, and many do. A few months ago, the parish council asked me to see how St Mark's might help support the thousands of Syrian refugees who have been given a new home in Australia. I contacted Anglicare, who referred me to the parish of Fairfield, where thousands of the refugees have settled. The parish administrator told me happily that parishes from all over Sydney had weighed in with welcome and the newcomers were being generously supported. Praise be to God. St Barnabas now calls itself a church for all nations.

Today's gospel story, secondly, is about **giving**. The magi made a long, hard journey to bring gifts to the newborn king. We've all heard many sermons about the gifts –about their symbolism and about their challenge to us. The same carol tells us that the gold signifies that Jesus was born a king, frankincense is a symbol of Jesus as God, and myrrh is a sobering reminder that Jesus was born to suffer – *Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

Some sources tell us that the gifts of the magi inspired Christians to give each other gifts at Christmas – they were the first Christmas presents. Others see them as symbols of the gifts we need to give Jesus through his church – dedicating our money, our time, and our energy to his service. Jesus tells us that what we give to people in need we give to him, yet it is easy to spend so much on ourselves we have too little to give to God, and to give to other people in His name. The gifts of the Epiphany have also become part of secular mythology and inspired other stories – like O'Henry's story called *A gift of the magi*, a story of mutual sacrificial love. She sold her hair to buy him a chain for his watch, only to find that he had sold his watch to buy her combs for her hair.

Thirdly, the gospel story is about **adoration**. Before the wise men gave the Christ-child their gifts they paid him homage, they worshipped and adored him. God in Jesus must be the focus of our worship, however we worship: Jesus the king, Jesus the teacher, Jesus the Redeemer, Jesus the overcomer of death. We gather, we meet together, we pray, we sing, we read, we listen, we take communion. . . all these are good, but they are all about us, about our needs and our desires. We need more. We could all be more God-focussed in our worship and in our prayer time, with less talk, talk, and more time to be still and know that he is God.

We face a new year in which the Christian church and the Christian message are becoming increasingly sidelined in this country, and other Western countries; our freedom to speak and witness is coming under ever-greater threat. So we may need to focus less on preserving our traditions, and our former social status, and our desire to control the moral agenda, and devote ourselves more to the adoration of the one *God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.*

Inclusion – giving – adoration. **I-G-A**. The familiar initials may help us remember these key elements of the Epiphany, and to practice them, to be sure of having a truly happy new year. #