

3 January 2021

Isaiah 60:1-6
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

During the mid-90s, when I still worked in the corporate world, the team I was part of would have an annual retreat and team-building event. These were wonderful times of learning, of strengthening understanding and relationships across the team, of fun and feasting and laughter. One year our retreat took our Wellington-based team to a vineyard and hotel out in the countryside just south of Auckland, in early December. Our first day – a Thursday – included review and planning, and then a sumptuous (and boozy!) dinner in the evening at which we received Christmas gifts. On the second day we engaged in outdoor team-building activities. We had great fun in the trust-building exercises, and we thought we were doing well at the problem-solving exercise when, in a *snap*, the atmosphere changed when I broke my ankle.

The feast of the Holy Innocents, traditionally observed on the 28th of December, has something of that sudden change in atmosphere. It is the feast where we acknowledge the baby boys of the Bethlehem district who were murdered on the orders of King Herod, desperate to protect his wobbly position on the throne from rival claimants. Racially, Herod the Great was an Arab, of the Idumean tribe from the southern part of the Holy Land. Religiously, Herod was a Jew. But his Jewish roots were not deep: just about 130 years before the birth of Jesus, the Idumeans had been conquered by the Jewish ruler Hyrcanus and on pain of death *forced* to become Jews. Culturally, Herod was Greek – this being the dominant culture of the region. Politically, Herod was Roman: he sided with Rome in all the major conflicts during his tenure, and at the time of Jesus' birth owed his crown to the favour of Caesar Augustus. He was brutal and completely paranoid. Sons for him were often seen as political rivals, and during the course of his reign three of them were murdered on his orders. He even had his beloved wife killed when he became suspicious of her political loyalty.¹

I mention this because this story sits in the background of the story we relate today – the visit of the Magi. The Magi come to King Herod on a remarkable quest: “Where

¹ Bailey, pp.56-57

is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” And Herod, who currently holds the title “King of the Jews” due only to the support of his Roman overlords, will do all he can to ensure that there is no-one else who might wrest that from him – even to the point of ordering the killing of all baby boys up to two years of age in and around Bethlehem. Just a few days after our adoration at the gentle scene at the manger, after our carol singing, our recounting the angelic words “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests”, we have a day whose tone might best be reflected in lament. Just a few days after the joyous celebration of Christmas we have a story that we’d rather not think about in the midst of happy gatherings and feasting and gift-giving. It feels like a complete let-down.

So why mention it (especially when in this year’s calendar the Sundays conveniently miss the unpleasant feast day)?

Well, I believe it is worth mentioning as a reminder, in the midst of all the gentle, cute, celebratory stuff of Christmas focussed around an innocent and harmless baby, that this Jesus came as one to whom all worldly powers would be opposed, because he is the world’s true king.

It is a reminder that in the midst of all the darkness and nastiness of the world, God comes in person, in vulnerability, and experiences the very worst that the world can do. In Jesus, Immanuel, God is with us where the pain and suffering is.

It is a reminder of the depth of evil, the evil that Jesus has come to redeem.

When I broke my ankle, the atmosphere of our happy teambuilding event completely changed. Now the team rallied around to support me and to see me off to Middlemore Hospital, where I ended up spending the weekend. The team then abandoned the problem-solving exercise, and the arrangement of the day was completely rethought. One of the team members, Meena, an Indian lady brought up in the Hindu tradition, travelled with me in the ambulance to keep me company, and saw me all the way through the admissions process into the ward. The following day she returned again to visit, to ensure I was comfortable, and to bring me some gifts to cheer me up: the rest of the team members had taken their scheduled Friday night flight back to Wellington. I discovered later what this had cost Meena. She was

meant to have been travelling to Taupo to have a long weekend there with her husband. They gave up much of their planned trip solely so that she could care for me. I was blown away by this expression of concern. This Hindu lady was for me a Good Samaritan.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, a few days in advance of its recognised date of 6 January. Epiphany celebrates the visit of the Magi, those mysterious people from somewhere in the East, who follow a star to find the infant King of the Jews. (The traditional dates for these feasts make the story run out of order: we have Herod's massacre of the Holy Innocents acknowledged before we acknowledge the visit of the Magi that tipped him off that something is afoot.)

When we come to the strange tale of the Magi, we may be struck by the oddness that people who are outside of Judaism (the nation who understood themselves to be the people of God), people versed in astrology, people who are worshippers of a different god, ... that these people are included in the announcement of the King of the Jews. With Paul, we too might talk of the mysterious ways of God!

The shepherds who worshipped at the manger were from the hill country around Bethlehem, and were most certainly Jews. The Magi who come a year or so later to find the "one born King of the Jews" were not Jews (in other words, they were Gentiles) and were quite likely from Arabia – gold was mined there, and frankincense and myrrh were harvested from trees that only grow in southern Arabia.² Among these people there were scholars who studied the stars and other cosmic phenomena. They did so not just for what we would regard as scientific purposes – astronomy we would term it today; they also studied the stars for signs and portents of significant events on earth – what we would call astrology. Exactly what was the star that caused them to up sticks and make a lengthy journey to Judea is debated. The most likely candidate, of which another instance occurred just recently, is a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the night sky. Jupiter was regarded the royal or kingly planet; and Saturn was sometimes thought of representing the Jewish people. The conclusion they drew is obvious.

² Bailey p.52

Some may feel uncomfortable, or offended, with the idea that the birth of Jesus – the Jewish Messiah and the one whom Christians would eventually designate as Son of the Most High God – is announced and honoured by people who do not share the same cultural background or religious convictions.

But there are two points to be made here.

The first point is that, while Jesus was King of the Jews to fulfil God's mission for the Jewish people, this mission was from the beginning for the benefit of all humankind regardless of background. We hear the resonances of Isaiah where he speaks of that nations coming to Jerusalem and bringing their wealth.

Isaiah's prophecy of God's work of restoration was specific to Jerusalem. But now we see its fulfilment in the person of Jesus. God's work of restoration is not limited to a particular place and its people: it is for all.³

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures there had been hints that God had some kind of plan for a worldwide family from the beginning. However, most Jews of the time of Jesus and Paul would have thought that their present calling, to be God's holy people and to keep his law, would remain the focus. But, in the light of Jesus' ministry and his dying and rising again, Paul feels he's been let in on God's plan that has remained hidden down the generations – that God had always intended to bring Gentiles into fellowship with himself, on equal terms with the Jews. Now it is clear to Paul that Gentiles get to share in the same inheritance; Gentile believers are to become fellow members of the one body with Jewish believers, of equal standing; and Gentiles are to have an equal share in God's promises made originally to Abraham.⁴

And because this is the case, so the character of the Church looks completely different from the surrounding society. Society is stratified, tribal, and does not have shared purpose; the Church is a gathering of equals who claim no identity other than their common identity as children of God in Christ and who are united behind a

³ Bailey p.54

⁴ Wright, *Paul*, pp.33-34

singular God-given purpose. God's intention is that this is then a significant role for the Church – as Paul said:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold witness of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.
(Ephesians 3:10)

Over against the ways of those like Herod and the ways of the spiritual powers behind such earthly rulers, the ways that make for and are supported by stratified, tribal, disunited societies, the Church is to declare and to demonstrate (*especially* to demonstrate) a different way: a community in which men, women and children of every race, colour, social and cultural background come together in glad worship and service of the one true God.⁵

The second point is that we should recognise that God is sovereign; God is not limited by what we think is appropriate. As I said a week or so ago, God is “changeable in his faithfulness” or “unpredictably dependable”. Surprisingly, God the Almighty works through weakness and vulnerability, works in and through little places like Bethlehem that might have been thought of as “least among the rulers of Judah”, works through men and women who, like Paul, might regard themselves as being “less than the least of all the Lord's people”. This is the mysterious way of God.

And in God's loving purposes for his people and for the whole world, God chooses at times to make use of people we might not expect, people we may not even approve of or like.

I am absolutely convinced of the truth of the Christian claim that there is only one true God, that this God is uniquely revealed in and humanly present as Jesus Christ, and that he is the only Way, Truth, and Life. However, at the same time I can look for the work of God among people who claim other gods or no god at all; and can celebrate that, and celebrate our common humanity.

The mission of the Church is to make God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit known to the world, across the globe and right here in Terrace End. We are called to a life of love

⁵ Wright, *Paul*, p.36

manifested in the welcoming and accepting of all peoples. The “mystery of God” is a trumpet call to authentic witness in a world of tragic disconnectedness and chaos.⁶

The fracturing of my ankle brought about a sharp break in our team’s plans and required a complete rethinking of their activities that day. This to me is a metaphor for the disruptive ways of God. As I’ve noted already, Paul had to completely rethink his understanding of the role of his people in the light of the ministry of Jesus. Like the Magi, having received a vision from God, he set off on another road.⁷

Following God requires that we be open to change, because as God works in his “changeable faithfulness” we need to be flexible to respond to his new work among us for the good of the world he loves. And we may find the change required in us to be painful.

In 1927 T S Eliot wrote a poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. It was written shortly after his conversion to Anglicanism, and it reflects something of the challenge and cost and discomfort of change. Eliot’s imagined wise man gives voice to it in this way at the poem’s conclusion:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

⁶ Kamudzandu

⁷ This point, and the suggestion of Eliot’s poem as an illustration, is drawn from Howell.

To journey with God asks much of us, because God in his love and faithfulness is at work in the world we inhabit.

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