

The Epiphany of Christ, moment by moment

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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The Epiphany of Our Lord (Year C) — 6 January 2013

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

So the 12 days of Christmas are over and we are now entering into the season of Epiphany. It is the season where the great gift of Christmas, Jesus, is revealed for who and what he is.

We begin the season of Epiphany by telling the story of the visit of the wise men from the East who came to visit the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. The story itself is one full of meaning and revelation. Some stories have the ability to take the reader or hearer into another realm. Jesus' parables do that. Truly great art does that. This story has the same ability, although at first glance it seems fairly straight-forward. In fact, for most of the time I have been reading the Bible, I have tended to skip over and through this story. Yet, in all four gospels no word is wasted. Each word, verse, and section reveals something special and important. Behind each phrase and section there is often an amazing back-story that reveals more and more.

The patristic theologians said that there were two privileged places where God is revealed—in scripture and in the natural world. Like scripture, when we glance at nature we can easily forget what is going on behind the scenes. For example inside each leaf is a world of energy and power, of atoms and swirling protons, of light becoming food. Inside each star, of which we can see only a dim light, is a furnace of nuclear fusion, of atoms melding and matter literally being re-created and released. Some of the stars we see are whole galaxies. Behind the words of scripture is another world revealed.

If we pick just four words out of our story and place them in context they become a revelation, an epiphany about Jesus the Christ. My four words are 'star', 'East', 'Herod', and 'baby'.

A star: the wise men from the East saw a star rising at the birth of Jesus and followed it to his birthplace. Any study of ancient civilizations tell us that humans have been studying and tracking the movements of stars as long as they have been staring up at the night sky. Some of the structures that remain from these ancient times were built to help study or to worship the heavens. The men in our story were probably astrologers, those who tracked and studied the stars and planets. They have seen a new star arise in the night sky and they interpret this as heralding the birth of a very special baby. The star leads them to the baby, a baby they have now come to worship.

There is such depth and beauty in this picture of a star arising. It tells me at least that the birth of Jesus is a cosmic event. All our births are cosmic events because we are part of the universe but Jesus birth is something extraordinary. A new star appears, the heavens literally move and shift at his birth. Themes of cosmic reality are picked up in places through the rest of the New Testament—John's prologue, Paul's hymn to Christ, the celestial beings of revelation, to name just a few. Jesus is not just a little Jewish baby.

We could, and many people do, take all this as poetic license and metaphor, as super fanciful embellishment. At the very least the star and its place in this story, however, point us to other realities beyond the obvious. There is something else beyond belief going on and it is going on in the depths of heaven as well as in the manger in Bethlehem. Just as the star we see in night sky is not merely a pin point of fading light but a furnace of creation, so there is in the baby Jesus something powerful, extraordinary and world changing.

The East and what it represents is part of what is so world changing. What does the East conjure up for you? Of course in Australia, the east is New Zealand, the Pacific and America. But for the Greeks, Romans and Jews the East was the realm of the 'other', the radically different and foreign. The East was where the Greek and Roman political expansion had reached its limit. Behind its frontiers were strange languages, religions and practices, strange foods and animals. It was both exotic and much sought. Throughout the ages the East, for the West, has been misunderstood, invaded and pillaged.

From the East, the place of the radical other, come the wise men bringing presents, worshipping the newborn baby. The early Christians and theologians understood this event to be a sign, a revelation, that Jesus Christ is for every nation and people, not only the Jewish people, who are his own tribe and nation. Paul says that this has been a hidden mystery, a gospel for all that is now being revealed.

However, there is a danger contained in this notion and one that has come true. The danger is when so-called followers of Jesus decide that since Jesus is for everyone then everyone must be for him. So follows forced conversions, inquisitions and crusades. It seems our fall back position is the ever present violence of us-and-them. Jesus himself tried to stop this perversion of his way. He rebuked his followers who wanted to punish others for their non-belief. He struggled by word and deed to get people to see the inclusivity of God.

The kingdom he proclaimed was one in which all images and assumptions about God, especially assumptions that God was our God or your God, were challenged. In the new Kingdom, Jesus abolishes not only the barriers of nation, race and ethnicity. He also transcends the boundaries of gender, religion, economics and social stratification, for in Christ (and here is one of my favourite verses from Galatians) "*there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28).

There is also no Christian and non-Christian, not in the heart of God, not in that kingdom. The Kingdom is beyond our classifications and limits of language. The Kingdom is about abundant life as John's Gospel puts it—life that is fundamentally about peace, justice and abiding oneness with God, the other and all creation. Some of us are so touched, so inspired, so convinced by the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus that we choose to live this on a daily basis, proclaiming his liberating truth in our lives by word and action. We have the great joy and delight of loving and being loved by the Christ as we freely and consciously choose this relationship for ourselves. But we must never, ever think that we own God, Jesus or the Kingdom. They are fundamentally beyond human control or even words.

Herod is someone whose whole life and family were about control. Here is someone who wanted to control Jesus and the kingdom. There are five Herods in the New Testament, and to a person they all persecuted Jesus and the early church. In addition to Herod the Great, who is the Herod of our gospel passage today and the homicidal maniac who ordered the murder of the Jewish innocents, there is his older son Herod Archelaus. Joseph feared Archelaus so much he took his family to Galilee. Then there is Herod's younger son, Herod the tetrarch, who is famous for murdering John the Baptist and becoming friends with Pilate over Jesus' crucifixion. Fourth, there's Herod King Agrippa the grandson of Herod the Great, who murdered James and tried to murder Peter. Finally, there's King Agrippa's son, also named Herod Agrippa, who bantered with Paul and mocked him.

All these Herods do the opposite of the wise men and those who attempt to walk in the light. They walk in the darkness of the corrupt political powers of the time, political powers that get into power by violence, intrigue, dishonesty and oppression. The Herod family must be one of the best examples of this corrupt political manoeuvring. They were not even Jews but became client kings through shady deals with Caesar Augustus, murdering each other and staying in

power by carrying out the Roman oppressive laws. They also propped up a corrupt temple system.

But Jesus was someone they could neither control nor corrupt, even though they attempt to bring down the dark curtain over the light of Jesus Christ. We know the light simply cannot be overcome. As John 1:5 states, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” And here in our story the light is a baby.

A baby: the cosmic mover of the heavens, the deity for whom the wise men have travelled from the east, the being who terrifies rulers and kings is a baby, a vulnerable, completely helpless baby. I baptized a little baby last Saturday. It’s so lovely to hold a baby. They are warm and floppy and they are completely helpless. They can also be loud, messy and confusing. Babies are a mystery.

I used to long for the time when my own babies could tell me what they wanted instead of me having to figure it out by trial and much error. But in many ways all humans are a mystery—to themselves and other people. Perhaps one of the things we can take from this story is that in the end Jesus, the word made flesh, is a mystery. He is not an idea to be understood, a doctrine to believe in, a God to worship. He is a person to be in relationship with, from whom to love and learn from, by whom to be loved and transformed. As we enter into a relationship with Jesus, then the truth about Jesus begins to be revealed to us. It is an epiphany of moments, as we come to know and be known by Christ, loved and redeemed by him, transformed by his Spirit and power.

May Jesus Christ be revealed to us as we love him more and more. May we be drawn deeper and deeper into his story. Amen.