

Starlight, Star Bright

Sermon for Epiphany, 3 January 2021
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Starlight, star bright

First star I see tonight

Wish I may, wish I might

Have the wish I wish, tonight.

This popular children's song "Starlight, Star Bright" has turned up in all sorts of places, from the lips of a bishop's wife in a late-40s Cary Grant movie to songs by Madonna and even by Metallica. It reflects the ancient pagan idea that you can wish on stars and shooting stars, that cosmic powers influence events on earth, and that astrologers help us to negotiate these forces. So, the horoscope that some people still take with more than a grain of salt was really an early form of depth psychology, correct at least in this: that larger

forces and events certainly do influence our lives and the sort of people we become.

Well, today, on this feast of Epiphany, these cosmic forces that the ancient pagan world took very seriously are put on notice. The birth of Jesus Christ masters and realigns the cosmic forces, which translates for us into a new human reality, with a whole new set of possibilities. The star that leads astrologers—the wise guides of their day—to the infant Jesus is a star that lights our minds and imaginations still, reassuring us that we *have* found our way to the fount of light and wisdom: to Jesus Christ, and to his Gospel.

So let's not worry with the literally minded about what ancient stellar event this story might have been referring to, or even something that could have been visible for a few days more locally, like last week's rare near-conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that showed up low and bright in our Western sky. No, this isn't astronomy, it's astrology, pointing us here to theology.

If we want some actual historical background to the appearance of this star, we need look no further than the imaginative vision of Isaiah that we heard from this morning. Israel is reassured that “Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising”. Our Epiphany Gospel of the star is lifted from Isaiah’s imagination and presented as God’s last surprise of the Christmas season, as we continue to unwrap the gift of Jesus Christ himself.

Now, these heavenly powers submitting themselves before the Christ child are introduced alongside some entirely this-worldly power, with Herod the pre-Roman king and his devious plan to track down and kill Jesus the young pretender. Here the cosmic and the political align, as wise men on a spiritual quest are enlisted unwittingly as spies on a murderous mission. Their scripted appearance in Bethlehem also follows Isaiah: we hear that when the nations do indeed come, “they bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord” —though Matthew adds the gift of myrrh, which was used in the preparation of corpses, because he knew already what Good Friday would bring.

So not just heavenly powers are involved in the Epiphany story, but earthly ones as well. All the coordinates of human dependency are redirected by Jesus, and new powers are released. Not least the power of discernment, as these supposedly wise men suddenly wise up and head home by another road. The infant Jesus' first impact on those who sought him was to make them alert, critically minded, and hence wary about the powers that be with their smooth talk. Hence God's gift of Jesus at Christmas comes packed in subversiveness. This new faith is not meant for fools and patsies.

Now, along with Matthew and his radical Epiphany message, our writer to the Ephesians announces from prison that the powers of empire are powerless to repress this new reality. For this author, his suffering for Christ means glory, not shame. Why? Because, he tells us, the world has now been decoded, the problem solved, the mystery revealed, so that all the supposedly controlling forces are shown up for what they are, their transcendence is undercut, and their

disempowerment has begun. Instead, it's now love and grace and mercy that hold sway in the universe.

There's a strong sense of what scholars have called early Catholicism in today's Ephesians passage, too, because the Church is given a key role in revealing this mystery, taking it right up to the powers that be: "so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places".

So, friends, powers heavenly and earthly—all the forces that shape and threaten human life—are put on notice at Epiphany. Once it was stars and portents and astrology that were brought to heel. Today's guiding articles of faith are different: an unregulated free market, for instance, with the fever dream of never-ending economic growth; the resurgence of authoritarian populism and racial superiority, too, which is matched by the rise of cancel culture. These controlling ideas cannot go unchallenged—at least in the Church and in the transformed imaginations of its members, now that we know where true wisdom is to be found.

The childrens' prayer that concludes "Starlight, Star Bright" isn't at all sentimental and turns out to be both profound and timely. I'll end with it today:

Shine on animals and plants
Illuminate their lifelong dance
Light the land, the sky and sea
And all that share life's mystery.
Little beacon out in space
Shine upon the human race
Grant this humble, hopeful prayer
That peace might flourish
everywhere.

AMEN.