

Epiphany: Time to Saddle Up

The Epiphany of Our Lord, Year A, 8 January 2023

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.

I've talked to you before about visiting Auschwitz, in Poland, and the death cell of Fr Maximillian Kolbe, the Franciscan who voluntarily took the place of a Jewish prisoner slated for execution. Many Christians like him refused Nazism's powers and principalities at the cost of their lives. In Berlin, we visited the Catholic memorial Church in Charlottenberg, Mary Queen of Martyrs, honouring German Catholics who died resisting the Nazis. It's a brutalist concrete architectural masterpiece, with a profoundly moving story to tell about God's power over transcendent brutality. This is nothing other than the self-giving love of Jesus Christ—an unlikely power, showing up how weak the world's powers and principalities actually are. I've told you before, too, about the Carmelite convent at Dachau, outside Munich, which you enter through a wall of the camp. It's called the Carmel of the Holy Blood. There, a community of nuns gives perpetual witness to where world-transforming power really lies, in a place where many others concluded that God must be dead.

All of these take up the witness of St Paul, testified to in our Ephesians reading this morning: "to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and powers in the heavenly places". And suffering for this witness, Paul in today's epistle tells his supporters not to worry, because this is the Church's glory: its costly witness in defence of the downtrodden, and especially its martyrs who proclaim God's abundant life.

Yet the Church doesn't always give this clear witness, does it? This struck me at the Holocaust Memorial in Lyon. The Catholic Church in Vichy France had not by and large stood up to the Nazis, with many Christians in favour of deporting the Jews. Among those killed for their resistance, though, I did note the name of one Dominican priest. I prayed that if I ever faced such a challenge, I'd have the faith and courage to do what he did. But so many Christians just play along, don't they, with no clear appreciation of what faith entails? This ranges from today's godless religious leadership in Russia, to Bible thumping far-right fanatics in America, now intent on sabotaging their own congress.

Friends, our Old Testament readings today paint a picture of God coming to rescue and deliver God's beloved people from hostile powers, at a time when powers in the heavens and powers of the nations were not readily distinguished. And from this Old Testament picture of kings coming to do homage, bringing gold and frankincense, comes Matthew's story of Jesus' Epiphany in today's gospel—though Matthew adds one more gift: there's not just gold for a king and incense for a God; there's also myrrh for anointing the dead, because Jesus' power over evil is most clearly revealed in his profoundly symbolic death.

Today's Gospel pits Jesus against Herod, who ends up blindsided and powerless. The stargazers and pundits of the day are drawn to Jesus, before whom all the powers, heavenly and earthly, bow down. According to this imaginative vision of Matthew, Herod and all the bullies like him, then and now, have met their match. They can do their worst, as the martyrs testify, because the threat of suffering and death has been overcome by a greater power. This power is at work when Baptism and Eucharist take hold of lives, calling us to a larger

identity, to a more profound existence, to a domestic heroism unimagined by the horde of drones and patsies who prop up today's powers and principalities. God has a higher purpose for us than that, and the star of Epiphany points our way to it. All the cosmic powers align in homage to Jesus Christ—an image of the human condition and of human history coming right at last.

Here today, friends, you and I enact this reality in word and sacrament, we dive into it. That way, when we leave here we can do so with a new sense of anticipation. Epiphany reminds us that there's more on offer here, and more at stake, than many have bargained for. Epiphany reassures us, and it calls us to saddle up.

The Lord be with you ...