

The Epiphany

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

It has been nice to have a short break, but in terms of the world news it has been a terrible week. The ferocious attacks on Gaza shocked the world out of its Christmas celebration. Gaza is that tiny strip of land 40 km by 12 km between Israel and Egypt that is home to 1.5 million Palestinians, 1 million of whom are 3rd and 4th generation refugees. The despair and oppression gave rise to the election of the nationalist movement Hamas as the democratically elected government in 2007. Israel, with US backing, then imposed a blockade on the borders of Gaza, preventing commercial goods crossing in and out and effectively strangling the economy, and seriously restricting fuel, medicines and aid. The attacks of this last week began on the seventh day of Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights. The Israelis call it "Operation Cast Lead", words from a poem about a gambling game played during Hanukkah. Political commentators place "Operation Cast Lead" in the context of the Israeli general election just weeks away. Journalists describe the last week as the most savage of the entire 60 year conflict between Israel and Palestine. Israel's aim is to stop the rockets that are regularly launched on Israeli farmlands and towns from within Gaza. In the last 6 years, these Palestinian fired rockets have killed about 20 people. In the last week alone, Israel's retaliation has resulted in more than 400 Palestinians being killed and 2000 wounded. Many Israelis, countless people in the UK, Europe, the US, are demonstrating, calling for an end to bombing,

That is the dominating feature of the broad, world context today. And in that context we come together in this place this morning, and find ourselves celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. The word 'epiphany' comes from the Greek language, and means the appearance or manifestation of something — and in Greek, it is used particularly of divine appearance and manifestation. Now, that all might sound a bit 'jargon-ish'; but if we put aside the jargon and think of the experience that stands behind the jargon, I suspect that the experience is not unfamiliar to us — that we all have known 'epiphanies' even though we may not use the word. They are those moments when the essential reality of something becomes radiant to us and we are momentarily stopped in our tracks — those timeless moments of awe and connection. The sense of wonder, of joy and of being lifted out of ourselves mark such moments as 'God-moments' — an epiphany! So, on the Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate that in the adoration of the magi, and we too see into the essential reality of all things, and what is often dark (or at least frosted) becomes radiant to us. That is God seen in and through the child, Jesus.

In our traditional imagery, we speak of a great light that shines in our darkness and shows us truth and the way forward. And our world context, dominated by the shameful of the Gaza situation, seems so much like great darkness in many ways — so much death and suffering! In the context of his times, following the suffering and dehumanising experience — the dark time — of exile, the Third Isaiah called his people to order their lives in such a way that they would reflect the light of God to all peoples: 'arise, shine for your light has come'. And he assured them — and us — that the darkness is not all there is. God comes to us. And God's light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Epiphany celebrates the coming of that light in the child Jesus in Bethlehem who shows us truth and the way forward. It speaks about encountering God in our creatureliness, precisely in that place we try to avoid. It says we find God there, in our vulnerability, which is the meaning of the incarnation. So today we encounter God in this extreme of suffering and need that faces our world, in the rawness of people's pain, and in people's yearning for peace with justice.

Epiphany speaks, too, about the inclusion of outsiders in the love and caring of God. And the people in Gaza — as well as the other millions of Palestinian people in refugee camps scattered through Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Israel — are outsiders to the systems of privilege and power in the world. They have a primary call on our compassion. The magi were not born of the Hebrew people, and they were not kings or even primarily 'wise men', though that is the traditional translation. The magi were of the Persian priestly class, who served the ruler with their astrological insight, but who were also seen as threats, with their destabilising influence, predicting events that might threaten the empire. Certainly Herod thought his little empire was threatened by the message of these magi. So the magi were strange, ambivalent, somewhat marginal figures, who enter the scene for us on the Feast of the Epiphany. And they are Gentiles which makes their status as outsiders more pronounced and noticeable.

And God is with them, with the outsiders and the marginalised, leading them, guiding the magi each step as they respond to God's light and they come to adore the child in whom they discern the truth of God's presence.

But none of this should surprise us. The whole purpose of the birth narratives — that Matthew has passed down to us — is to convey the profound conviction that God is doing a new thing. Matthew wants to say to his readers — and remember his first readers were mostly Jews — that in the context of a long and uneven relationship with the Jewish people God is now taking a new initiative through the conception and birth of Jesus. Jesus will manifest God's saving presence in the world and it will make possible reconciliation between people, the end of ancient divisions. It will mean the inclusion of outsiders and the marginalised within the sphere of God's love, all people sharing justice and dignity, creating one new humanity, reconciled and restored, in Christ, as the writer of Ephesians puts it.

The child Jesus is revealed as a king in Matthew's story. The magi are led by a star that they interpret as the sign of a king. 'Where is the child born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage?' And they bring gifts for a king, gold, frankincense and myrrh. But Jesus' kingship, even at this stage in the gospel, stands in sharp contrast to all established kingship represented by Herod. Jesus' kingship is in weakness. He is the subject of death threats. He is the one who, as God's presence in the world, will bring God's justice and righteousness. As the psalmist describes, he is the one who will care for the poor and dispossessed and give them justice. And he will declare, demonstrate, live the truth that all human life is precious in God's sight.

The magi come to pay homage to Jesus. They do obeisance. It is a very common action in the ancient world, of bowing to the ground, prostrating yourself before God or before another, to express their surpassing greatness and your littleness in comparison, and you express it with your body before them. Obeisance before God carries the meaning of worship and adoration. It is for this reason that we come aside, bringing with us the burden of the world context. Obeisance — worship and adoration — before God allows us to express the greatness of God. It allows us to set ourselves aside for the moment, our concerns and feelings and preoccupations, and it allows God, to have God's proper place and allows God's being, God's concerns, to have room in our lives. The magi do obeisance to Jesus, to God present in Jesus, and they offer their gifts, tokens of themselves, to honour him.

For centuries, Christians have come back to the idea that what happens with the magi is what has to happen with each of us. We are to recognise God's presence in Jesus, and do obeisance, maybe not physically, but metaphorically, allowing God's greatness, God's being and God's concerns to have their proper place in our lives, and offering ourselves to honour God.

We come back to the horror of Gaza. And we worship, recognising our utter creatureliness that the child Jesus has shared, and that is the place where we encounter God; and we do obeisance, we offer what we can, and we pray.

I have been to Gaza on three occasions, although it must be nearly ten years since I was last there. Even then the oppression, the suffering, the poverty was unbelievably awful. Now it must be unimaginable. I saw the enormous efforts being made by the tiny number of Christians — through the MECC — to support the refugees and to bring some hope to their lives. I wonder what they can possibly do in the current situation. Are they still there? Are they still alive? Through our NCC, we have supported the efforts of those local Christians for many years. We do what we can. And we support all efforts that will bring a just and lasting peace. We do what we can.

Our faith is about recognising Christ in the person of our sisters and brothers in need, and responding with compassion, feeling with, suffering with, and acting with Jesus to include all within the love and caring of God. What is important is to respond to what God lays on your heart and give expression God's love and caring and compassion. This is the light that shines in our darkness. And who knows, maybe out of this, people will rediscover our shared humanity, and our world will allow room for reconciliation and compassion — allow room for God.