

Epiphany and the Catholic Faith

Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany—Sunday 6 January 2019

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

Revd Canon Professor Scott Cowdell, St Philip's, O'Connor

+IN THE NAME OF GOD: FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One thing I really value about the Catholic tradition is its comprehensiveness—its generous openness to the wisdom of the world. It's anything but narrow and suspicious. The Catholic tradition isn't afraid of atheist sceptics like Marx and Freud, for instance—it is critically open to them, and even hints pointers their voices in scripture and tradition. It's not afraid of evolutionary biology—even of its radical exponents like Richard Dawkins. Rather, it learns from them, and seeks to understand God creating a world which continues to 'create itself' through aeons of natural selection. It's not afraid of new thinking on sex and gender, either, though that one has taken a bit longer. But these days we're finding new insights in the Bible that have helped us to understand Christ as the true liberator of human sexuality. I could go on. There's no truth which human wisdom has devised or uncovered that hasn't been grafted into the Catholic vision in time.

The wise men who come to Jesus in today's gospel—the stargazers, the philosophers, the experts of their day; they find in Jesus that their search for truth has moved decisively forward, and that their questioning is taken up into wonder and contemplation. I've long been fascinated by the verse in today's gospel that says of the departing Magi 'they left for their own country by another road'. So it is with the Catholic faith. As the wisdom of the ages is brought to Christ, so too the encounter with Christ changes the wisdom of the world. The wise seekers who find Christ return to where they came from by another road. Having encountered Christ and been transformed by him, their view of the world will never be the same. They'll fit their psychology or their biology or their cultural studies or whatever into a bigger framework of meaning than they started with. This is why theology used to be called 'the queen of the sciences', because the catholic vision gathers together *but also illuminates* all truth, at its best leaving nothing out.

Another thing I like about the Catholic vision, along with its comprehensiveness, is its confidence, its boldness. Because these days we need to be recovering some confidence and boldness in a Church that too often lacks it. Epiphany is a story to build this confidence and boldness, because it puts the bullies on notice. Which bullies?

Well, first there's Herod, who I like to imagine being played by Kevin Spacey, as in *House of Cards*. With delicious irony, Matthew arranges things so the powers that be, the future enemies of Jesus, Herod and his cronies, are informed in no uncertain terms who the *real* King is. And it's not just Herod. The wise men are in fact Persian wise men, and of course Persia, or Babylon, was the place where God's people were exiled in the time of Isaiah the prophet. Is Matthew telling us that the top echelon among Israel's former enemies is now lining up to do homage?

This idea is certainly there in today's Old Testament reading, from Isaiah, which Matthew would have meditated on when thinking out his gospel narrative. Isaiah today invites God's people to take courage. Once they were a beaten, exiled people, but one day even Kings will come to the brightness of their rising, and the foreigners who once enslaved them will now come with gifts to honour them—from Midian, Ephah and Sheba they'll come, to offer gold for a king, and incense for a God. You can see where Matthew got his inspiration—the Magi are given to us by Matthew to illustrate how God has decisively turned the tables, how the day of God's favour has decisively dawned. I think Matthew might be telling us that even former conquerors are now turning up, but with the boot firmly on the other foot.

But the bullies aren't just earthly ones. They're heavenly ones as well. And here we can understand the real purpose of that perplexing star in today's gospel. We don't have to read Epiphany as a story about an actual star, and then wonder how a star can stop over a house. We don't have to scour ancient history and do computer back-projections of comet movements, to uncover what might actually have happened, as some well-meaning but wrongheaded scientists have tried to do—as if the point of this gospel is dependent on astronomy. No, Matthew uses astronomy to point to theology, or more correctly he uses *astrology* to point to theology. Stars in the ancient world weren't just giant thermo-nuclear furnaces, as we now know them to be. Rather, they were more astrological than astronomical. The stars were understood to be powerful, semi-divine beings. In many cultures they were personified as we see in the naming of constellations, and they were worshipped. The half-hearted faith of some today in their horoscopes—that their future is revealed in the stars—is an echo of astrological beliefs that held great sway in the ancient world.

But biblical faith from the beginning has told a different story. The God of the Bible, right at the start of Genesis, creates the two great lights—the sun and the moon. This isn't a Sunday School version of stellar evolution, which we have to take literally. Rather, it's a statement of faith about what sort of world we now live in, and what sort of confidence we can have. The creation narrative in Genesis robs the cosmic powers of their hold over people's lives—if the God of the Israelites has created them, then they can't be worshipped and they shouldn't be feared. And so it is in today's gospel. The star is a symbol of all those heavenly powers, all the unseen forces which ancient people took so seriously. Thus a cosmic terror is muzzled, and it submits to Jesus Christ. It's met its match!

Elsewhere in the gospels, we see this same use of mythological imagery as it's ripped from its ancient pagan context and redeployed to illustrate real-world truths of actual history—truths confirmed in Jesus' own day and in our own day: truths that the first Christians knew, and that we still know, about Jesus having the power to change hearts and imaginations, to change lives and nations. So, for example, when a fish from the ocean deeps brings up a coin for Jesus to give to Peter for the temple tax (Matt 17: 24-27)—up from the mythical realm of chaos, that is—that realm of chaos is being put in its place, just as at the start of Genesis, while at the same time the sacrificial religio-cultural system of the Temple that demands the tax is being gently mocked. Likewise, when the storms are stilled on the lake, or when the sun is darkened at noon, or when the demons are driven out and the dead are raised, we're given symbolic reassurance that all the little-understood forces which so ruled and circumscribed the lives of ancient peoples are now firmly on notice. There's a new kid on the block! His name is Jesus Christ! He is now the force to be reckoned with.

So, friends, we take heart—in our lives, in our Church, in our world, *certainly* in the face of our doubts and our confusions. We *have* found our way to where the answers lie, we *can* recover our confidence, we *can* risk the adventure of faith. Nothing in this complex, wonderful, occasionally terrible world need stop us—no earthly power, no toxic spiritual something-or-other. Today, in this Epiphany Eucharist, we celebrate Christ as the meeting point of all truth, and as our starting point, once again, for the adventure of living the Catholic faith.

The Lord be with you...