

Epiphany

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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8th January 2006, Epiphany

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

Today we celebrate the Epiphany — actually it is really observed on January 6th, the 12th day of Christmas, and marks the close of the Christmas festival season.

What does the word epiphany mean? = to be manifest, to be seen, the Christ child has been seen, accepted and worshipped by the gentiles.

In our faith story Jesus is thus portrayed as the saviour of all humankind. He is not simply the long awaited messiah of the Jewish people of Israel.

What are we to make of this special festival which has been observed in the Christian Church longer than the Christmas day of 25th Dec? There are pictures of the three royal magi in the catacombs of the 2nd century AD, and they are named in mosaics of Ravenna.

In the past I have found some comfort in suggestions that there was a special alignment of the planets which would have then appeared like a brighter star, or Haley's comet was passing by around that time which could explain the impossible moving star. It is only mentioned in Matthew after all. Not in the other gospels. And Roman historians of the time do write of a general sense in the region of expectation that something special was going to happen.

But this year I am content with trying to understand the meaning of the story. Why has it been such an important part of our Christian faith story for the past 2000 years?

One of the reasons is that very early on it came to symbolise the reaching out of the Christian gospel from its Jewish roots to the gentiles, which was the term for anyone who wasn't a Jew... The magi were non-Jews, most likely astrologers from Persia, who played a leading role in their own societies, so their seeing the star and following it to the Christ child, gives authority to those who, like St Paul, feel called to take the Christian faith story to those who have not heard about it.

It was no longer a faith only available to those born Jews.

Also by tradition one of the magi has black skin, which further affirms the spreading of the gospel beyond the confines of Israel, of the known world.

From the earliest times the wise men became three even though unnumbered and unnamed in Matthew, and given names, which in the west became

Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior... they also became increasingly like kings — no doubt in part because the artists liked to draw their sumptuous costumes, as well as the fact they were bringing very expensive gifts. Emphasising their kingship also fitted in with the Hebrew scriptures of kings paying homage which affirmed the early Christians in their belief that Jesus was the long awaited messiah.

So an abundance of symbols to keep the artists, poets, writers, priests and theologians happy and preoccupied with meaning. And the people's faith story enriched with colour, mystery and a touch of the exotic.

To complete the symbolism known to most of you — the gifts: gold for kings, frankincense for worship, and myrrh an ointment for the burial of the dead, connecting Jesus to the words of foretelling of the Hebrew scriptures, for us the Old Testament, and symbolising his life as son of God, high priest, and his death for the redemption of the world.

I'd like to share one of the legends which have grown around the unadorned story in Matthew. This very old story says that the wise men were of three different ages.

Caspar was a very young man, Balthazar was in his middle years, and Melchior was an old man.

When they arrived at Bethlehem, the three of them betook themselves to the cave of the Saviour's birth and they went in one at a time.

When Melchior, the old man, went into the cave, there was no one there but a very old man his own age with whom he was quickly at home. They spoke together of memory and of gratitude.

The middle-aged Balthazar encountered a middle-aged teacher when he went into the cave, and they talked passionately of leadership and responsibility.

When young Caspar entered, he met a young prophet and they spoke words of reform and promise.

Then when they had all gone outside after going in one by one, the three of them took their gifts and went in together. And when they went in together there was nobody there but a twelve day old infant. Later on they understood.

The saviour speaks to every stage of life.

The old hear the call to integrity and wisdom.

The middle aged hear the call to creativity and responsibility.

And the young hear the call to identity and intimacy.

I love this story for its wisdom and humour and truth as it seeks to remind us of the connection between our faith and our lives and the way we interact in the world.

I like it so much that last night I cut off the beard of one of these wise men. Obviously the person who drew up these patterns did not know about this legend!

(As each of the magi in the story had been introduced I had brought out from the pulpit a knitted figure of Melchior, Balthazar & Caspar)

What this legend is reminding us is that our faith and our God is greater than anything we as individuals can say or understand, it is encouraging us to be more inclusive of other views and experiences of our faith, and gently and lovingly reminds us that our own faith positions are much related to our own life experiences, and at any moment in time to something as simple and unchangeable as our present age in years!

And that's a nice thought.

And a forgiving one — it stops us being too hard on ourselves.

We can relax and just be as we are.

Except...

But...

.and there's always a 'But'

when we reflect on the deep things of life... and start getting tangled up in legends and old stories... going back to the story of the magi, let us remember that they travelled at night out of their known world, they ran the risk of making fools of themselves when they stated their purpose in Herod's court, and these men who were used to homage and others kneeling before them, they knelt before a baby in a stable and offered him priceless gifts.

So are we to have to find more meaning in this story? Is it not so neatly summed up after all?

In what Archbishop Rowan Williams calls “book providence”, which I take to mean fortuitous coincidence, when searching for my copy of the Oxford book of Carols to get the words and music of ‘We three kings’ which is not included in our hymn book, I came upon a book of sayings of the Roman Catholic Archbishop Romero which I had not looked at for years. I read the words he said on this day 28 years ago, two years before his assassination. They are so beautiful and strong that I’ve included them with the song words.

They link with the offertory hymn I had already chosen and which was written over 100 years ago:

We limit not the truth of God
to our poor reach of mind,
by notions of our day and sect,
crude, partial and confined:
no, let a new and better hope
within our hearts be stirred:
*the Lord has yet more light and truth
to break forth from his word.*

And to the hymn I had already asked our deacon Linda to sing which is based on the words of the old man Simeon when he sees the Christ child in the temple. Words of thanksgiving and perhaps the words which will be said as our coffin leaves the church for our body’s final resting place.

So in response to this story of the magi, may we **remain** pilgrims,
and those of us who are older
may we strive to become wiser
and more integrated in our lives,
those of us in our middle years
become more responsible,
more willing to accept the challenges of undertaking new ventures,
and those of us who are younger attend to our studies and the strengthening of our bodies to
prepare us for leadership and
a partnership, hopefully for life,
as we strive to make our mark in the world, and preferably to change it for the better.

Let each of us start today,
whether we are Caspar, Balthazar or Melchior....
let us leave this service of worship open to the truths and experiences of others,
encouraged by the words of Archbishop Romero and the song of the three kings —

let us go out the way Moses descended Mount Sinai:

with our faces shining,
with our hearts brave and strong
to face the world’s difficulties
because we follow
the star of our faith
which like the star of the magi
guides us
to the perfect light of God.

Amen.