

Epiphany 2020

Matthew 2:1-12

Many folk are continuing to evacuate their homes and farms, businesses and holiday houses as we speak, some are fleeing scorched tracts of the country. It has not been the holiday season that many planned for and looked forward to. There is much suffering in places not so very far from us, and we are reminded of it constantly by the smoke which continues to shroud us, stinging our eyes and throats. The adjectival big guns have come out: extraordinary, unprecedented, catastrophic, hellish - this they clearly are... inevitably someone mentioned the 'A' word.... Apocalyptic.

Given the difficult start we have had to this New Year, I wondered what the year would bring for me, whether my stars would align, so I took a sneak peek at my horoscope for this year, it read: *You can't please everyone all the time; it's time to call a spade a spade. Avoid a rebound relationship since it will just drain you further. Ensure you are on the right side of the law. Your health will be great, but your finances need serious attention.*

Astrology is a pseudoscience, (or whatever it is) that is at least four thousand years old and remains popular today with such practitioners as Mystic Meg having regular spots in the daily press. We meet some of these folk this morning: the Magi, the sages from the east, looking to the stars that they might foretell the future. Of course we know today that peering deep into space we are in fact looking into the past, although even that seems to be in question such is the business of space and time, as one astronomer put it: 'we are looking back to the future.'

At Food4Thought in December we considered the world from which St Matthew's gospel emerged. Dr Colin asked us to use our imaginations. We were taken to Antioch, a large city on the Mediterranean, home to large population, many languages, cultures and creeds - a cosmopolitan city. It is around 70AD, the Romans have finally lost their patience with the Judean rebels and the city of Jerusalem is besieged and invaded. The Temple at the heart of the city is burnt and destroyed, many folk are fleeing the city. Some arrive in Antioch where Matthew is beginning to write a gospel, he writes for those who have seen their homes, businesses and importantly the centre of their faith destroyed. Matthew writes about a renewed faith centred not on the Temple but on the person of Christ - it is Good News. But Matthew is writing from a very particular perspective. His gospel is based on writings he clearly knew, what today we call Mark's gospel, he was writing from the tradition of the apocalypse of the crucifixion and the empty tomb.

Matthew of all the evangelists knew the prophecies of the Old Testament. At the crucifixion we hear hints of the prophet Joel, who wrote: *I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of*

smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. This is a classic piece of Old Testament apocalypticism and there will always those who will say that we are experiencing some sort of apocalypse, a Revelation of God. But we need to be very careful if we are to find in this writing a warning about our current plight. We know that only too often our scriptures are used to moralize or threaten. This is to misread what is at the very heart and nature of the gospel.

If we read Matthew very carefully he does not proclaim that something *will* happen. Matthew's Good News is a proclamation that something *has* happened and *is happening* among us now. When we, the Church, live as we are called to live, loving God and neighbour, we live in such a way that something *has happened* and it is in its light that we forgive our enemies, give to those who ask of us, and return good for evil done to us and in our own day and context, care for those affected by disaster, care for our environment. We can do this because we have been baptised into Christ, his life and death and resurrection. St Paul writes today in Ephesians that this is the mystery that has been 'revealed' (the word is apocalyptic) to him. What we are doing when we read gospel is looking back to the future.

I read during the week: 'I know many Americans think of Christmas as a single day and like to clear away the trappings of the season well before the fifth of January, but that is sheer barbarism, if you ask me, morally only a few steps removed from human sacrifice, cannibalism, or golf.' Now I wouldn't go quite that far, but there is something to be said for the ongoing, unfolding of this wonderful season. Today we are celebrating the feast of the Epiphany. The manifestation of Christ to the gentiles, in other words God has come among all people, not just those we might like to think are chosen. This is important.

Matthew is speaking to a cosmopolitan gathering. Some of them believe that some sort of apocalyptic event has occurred in the destruction of Jerusalem. Some of them no doubt would be wanting to rise up against Roman rule, 'what have the Romans ever done for us.' But Matthew says something quite different. He doesn't lay blame, indeed if anyone is criticized it is the religious elite and their use of the scriptures, Matthew has Jesus saying that blessed are they that suffer.

The temple destroyed by the Romans remains a ruin to this day. In our world we continue to be threatened by fire and drought, in some places flood, or war or civil strife, famine or disease. But to see in them some form of apocalypse is to misunderstand Christian theology. The apocalypse occurred at the death of Christ, that was *the* revelation of God. We look back into the gospels and see the future. In the renewal brought by the resurrection we see the future, indeed it is Matthew who has Christ saying that he is with always to the end of time; this is our hope and our prayer at this difficult time for our nation and its people. Amen.