

Sunday 3rd January 2021 Cathedral, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m.		The Epiphany of our Lord The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles (transferred from 6th January)
Isaiah 60:1-6	Psalm 72:1- 7,10-14	Ephesians 3:1-12
		Matthew 2:1-12
FOLLOW THE STAR TO BETHLEHEM		

“On entering the house, the wise men saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” (Matt 2:11).

On this first Sunday of 2021, I pray God’s blessing on each one of us in the year that lies ahead. We are living in difficult and dangerous days. Our prayers are with all who are infected with Covid, with their families, with our health care workers; and with all who have lost loved ones in recent days. Through all this, our hope and trust is in God, who holds us in the palm of his hands.

EPIPHANY

We celebrate today the Feast of the Epiphany – the visit to the child Jesus of the three magi or wise men from the East, the “three kings” of the carol. The word “epiphany” means “appearing” or “revelation”. We speak of having an epiphany moment – when suddenly we see something clearly for the first time – now I understand! Now it all makes sense! Now I realise what is happening! Another title for today is “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles” – manifestation being an event or action that clearly shows something otherwise hidden - when Christ

the light of the world is shown and revealed, not only to the Jews, but to all people. St Paul in our 2nd reading speaks of the mystery that has been revealed: “that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (|Eph 3:6).

The Gospel reading tells us the story. The magi – wise ones from the East - follow the star in their search for the king of the Jews. They find the child Jesus and they worship.

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI

According to St Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus was born during the rule of King Herod, who had been appointed King of the Jews by the Roman authorities. But Herod was not of the line of King David. He was therefore not recognised as the true king. He was an able and competent ruler, but was also a cruel and brutal man, who killed any who might threaten his power, including his favourite wife, some of his sons, and members of his family. So his action in putting to death all the children in and around Bethlehem who were under the age of two years, which follow’s today’s gospel reading, is in character. Herod is any figure of power who abuses and bullies and dominates, who controls, who insists on his or her own way regardless of others, who is always right...but who destroys whatever or whoever stands in his way.

Magi – wise ones - from the East come to Jerusalem. Magi were a priestly educated group, with particular knowledge of the stars. They represent the highest level of wisdom of

the Gentile world, the spiritual and intellectual elite, the world of knowledge and learning. They are searching for the one born king of the Jews “for we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” To follow the star speaks of following a dream, following a vision; responding to a call; walking into the light. Their journey is part of their search for wisdom and truth. It is a journey that brings them to Christ who is the Word of Wisdom, or truth made flesh¹.

The star they follow is no ordinary star. It does not stay fixed in the heavens; instead, it moves and will later lead them to the house where the child Jesus is to be found. Some suggest that the star was a comet or some gathering of the planets. There was also the popular belief that each person is represented by a star, which appears at one’s birth. Some commentators link the star of Bethlehem to the prophesy of Balaam (Numbers 24:17) that a star will come out of Jacob, and a sceptre will rise out of Israel. Here we have the fulfilment of Balaam’s prophecy.

The magi go first to Jerusalem, the seat of power. There they encounter those who later seek to destroy Jesus: not only King Herod, but also the scribes and chief priests – those who are the ones who plot to have Jesus arrested and put to death. Yet even the scribes and chief priests with their knowledge of scripture are able to find signs of the Messiah in the prophet Micah: he is to be born in Bethlehem; he is the ruler who will be the shepherd of the people.

¹ Matthew Charlesworth SJ, *Epiphany: Feast of inclusivity*

And so, following the star, and guided by Herod and by the scribes and chief priests, the magi make their way to Bethlehem, to the house where the child is to be found. There they kneel down, pay him homage, and give gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gifts represent and point to the identity of Jesus as the true King of the Jews, as prophet, priest and king: gold for a king; frankincense for a priest and prophet; myrrh for one who is to die.

It is an image of the meeting of civilisations, the academic and learned world coming to kneel before the Christ child. In contrast to the Jewish authorities and spiritual leaders, they as Gentiles and foreigners recognise Jesus as king. In coming to worship, they fulfil the words of Isaiah: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord (Isaiah 60:3, 6). There is also an echo of Psalm 72:10 “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring tribute: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.”

The magi in their journey to find Jesus represent us in our yearning and longing, in our searching for knowledge, understanding, meaning, purpose.

AND SO...

Even though the church exists and bears witness in a larger political context, with earthly rulers who have great power, even of life and death, the will and purposes of God do prevail and are fulfilled. Herod tries to destroy Jesus by

having all the children in the area killed; Jesus escapes. In time, Jesus is crucified, but he rises from the dead. The will of God prevails.

What a contrast between Herod, who ruled the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea and the surrounding areas, with Jesus, the true “king of the Jews” and instrument of God’s purposes for his chosen people. Earthly power meets the authority and purposes of God. And for a while, this earthly power does as it chooses. The children are put to death; Jesus is later crucified. People are murdered in northern Mozambique by Islamist extremists. Loved ones die of Covid. Corruption destroys the fabric of our society. Alcohol abuse breaks down families. There is suffering and hardship and sadness and loss.

But earthly powers cannot thwart the ultimate will of God. Our lives of faithful worship, witness and service point to the lordship of Christ and the sovereign will of God; and so they point to the greater purposes of God in us and through us. There are times when our very existence as the church, our identity as Christians, is a threat and a challenge to secular authority, to those around us. It is a threat and a challenge because we point to another kingdom, another power, another authority, another allegiance. We point to the rule and lordship of Christ, to the true king, to the one who has the first call on our lives.

This is the star that we follow, the star that leads us to Bethlehem: the star of promise and of hope, the star that brings us to a place of reconciliation with God, with one another, with those different from ourselves. It is the star

that leads us through danger to the place of light. It is the star that leads us to the new world, to the promised land, to the city of God; kingdom of God, to a society of hope and belonging.

CONCLUSION

The Feast of the Epiphany and the birth of Christ says that God's love and grace is poured out upon us.

God loves us.

Let's follow the star to Bethlehem: the place of encounter with wonder and joy and delight.

Keep hope alive, God says, follow the star to Bethlehem: follow the light that God gives, discover the grace and love of God in the strangest places. God will lead us through the darkness to find the light.

Keep hope alive, God says: be like the magi, the wise ones who look for the presence of Christ in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty.

Keep hope alive, God says: follow the star to Bethlehem, to build a community of love and peace, a community of justice and inclusion, a community where all are welcome and all belong.

Follow the star to Bethlehem. Let us journey towards the light, and with the magi, let us kneel before the child Jesus, and offer our lives, our worship, our adoration.

I conclude with a few lines from a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, lines made famous when they were quoted by King George VI, on Christmas Day, 1939, in his speech to the Empire. The words are a call, an invitation and a promise to each of us at the start of the new year:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’
And he replied:
‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand
of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a
known way.’”²

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Dean of Grahamstown
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² *God Knows* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gate_of_the_Year accessed 2nd January 2016