

“From All Nations” – Mat 2:1-12 – Epiphany – Jan 6/08

Have you been watching the circus on TV brought to you by the same people who want to export their brand of democracy to the rest of the world? Mercy! Now I’m a bit of a news junkie, and so I have hardly been able to tear myself away, although it has become a whole lot easier now that Wolff Blitzer has fallen into a mantra of “the best political team on TV” – I’ll bet that CNN doesn’t care, but I have developed a reflex twitch to that phrase, and the second I hear it my finger spasms and changes the channel.

The one CNN announcer I do enjoy is Jack Cafferty, otherwise known as “the loveable curmudgeon” – I can relate – and who has recently published a book titled “It’s Getting Ugly Out There!” I haven’t read his book yet, but on air he has an acerbic wit and isn’t afraid to identify the inane irrationality of public life. In his book Cafferty describes the increasing polarization in American society – the deepening split as people increasingly move to extreme positions on issues.

Unfortunately the same phenomenon seems to be happening around the world. Even sadder is that as the rifts deepen they almost always seem to align with religious, national, and race lines. The movement seems to spiral inexorably downward from “I don’t agree with what you think” to “I don’t like what you say” to “I hate who you are” to “I hate all who are like you!” With that progression the battle lines harden, and violence and chaos takes over. Whether it’s Kenya with intertribal massacres or Kosovo with civil war or the ever-volatile Middle East or any of the other uncountable places where racial and tribal and religious grouping has escalated into bloodshed, the process of “othering” – of identifying and focusing upon differences with the other – seems to be a sad characteristic of human existence.

Tragically, when religion is involved the situation seems to deteriorate to the deepest of divisions and the bloodiest of conflicts, as people focus on erecting boundaries that exclude others from receiving the grace to which they see themselves alone as being entitled. They, and we, need to hear again the story of the magi’s visit to the infant Jesus, for this is a story about taking down those boundaries and the barriers people erect between themselves and others.

As with so many of the bible stories, and especially the ‘well-known’ bible stories, in order to really hear the story we need to hear it with fresh ears. So that we may hear what the story is really about, we need to peel away all of our well-learned misunderstandings about the story. First, of course, is the number ‘three’, as in the popular hymn we sang. The text doesn’t say ‘three’, only that there were more than one of them. The most likely reason for people coming to assume there were three is the reference to three types of gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – assuming three gifts equals three givers.

More important, however, is the misunderstanding over who these magical men were. If we follow the misconception in the hymn that they were kings we miss one of the key points Matthew was trying to make. I use the term ‘magical’ deliberately – for the term Matthew used to describe them was indeed ‘magi’, the very root from which the words magical and magician derive. We can definitely know them as being wealthy, filthy rich even, both from their expensive gifts and from their ability to wander on a world quest to find the child whose birth they had divined, but there is no indication in the text that they were kings, and to call them kings moves us away from Matthew’s intention.

Even to use the more common these days term of “wise men” puts a hole in Matthew’s intention. When we use the expression ‘wise men’ I think most of us immediately picture learned and scholarly men, Doctors of This or That. The term “wise men” – to be carefully distinguished from “wise guys” – invokes images of men of great intellectual integrity, of renowned scholastic repute, great sages who have wrestled with irrefutable facts and rock-solid rationality. Matthew is a little bit nervous about touting the magi as magical men, however he wants you to be in no doubt that these are indeed magi, astrologers who can read the mysterious signs of the universe. They use the positions of moon, planets and stars to glean the meaning of life, or at least the whichness of what. To be sure, that

is nowhere near as messy as studying the innards of chickens or the shape of moose droppings, but for all that they work with charts and tables they are still diviners of magical signs. As I mentioned, Matthew is a bit uncomfortable about their role, even if he wants to show that their interpretations were right about having seen “his star at its rising” and connecting that with the birth of Jesus.

Consequently, in addition to an astrological sign we have them literally following a moving star that appeared when they were in Jerusalem, and which directed them to Bethlehem. Now call me confused, but seeing a star in the east and following it westward seems a bit confusing, but that may just be because Matthew is massaging the story a little too heavily! In any event, their unusual powers of ESP and perception return quickly and they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

It's important that we not lose sight of these magi being magical men, because if we do we miss several important points Matthew was trying to make about the origins of Jesus. The most obvious point, of course, is that the birth of Jesus was so important that it caused ripples in the very fabric of the universe, ripples that like a tsunami could be felt far across the world. We need to hear that these magi, attuned to such ripples, could even in a far-off land detect that something unusual, even something unique, had happened. Matthew wants us to know that at a distance beyond which rumours could not travel it was clear to their seismic senses that something heavenly had happened.

But more important to Matthew, and most importantly to us, is that these magi were not Jewish. These foreigners, practicing a religion clearly different from that of the Israelites, the Jews, not only sensed the birth of the Messiah, they did something about it – they came and paid the appropriate homage to him. Can you see now how Matthew is presenting their response as appropriate and favourable, particularly as he sets it against the reaction of the priests and scribes who responded only to the secular ruler Herod? Those bastions of the Jewish faith were able to quote from the prophets as to where the Messiah would be born, but apparently failed to keep a watch at that location, or at least missed all the signs. This is a favourite theme of Matthew, as time and time again he points out how the people of Israel missed seeing Jesus as the Messiah in their midst, where to others it was abundantly clear.

Matthew wants us also to see clearly that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Christ, unique in his relationship with God right from his birth, and that his birth had cosmic, earth-shaking consequences. The implication of that is clear also – that in the gift of His Son Jesus, God was acting for the ‘greater good’ of all nations and all peoples. The grace and mercy offered by God crosses all boundaries of ethnicity, of race, of colour, of location, of history. That doesn't mean that we can't celebrate our various histories, at least the good parts, that we can't relate to family and clan and tribe; but it does mean that the forgiveness of sins in Christ's name is available to anyone who accepts that forgiveness, regardless of age, gender, colour, race, clan, tribe, nationality or any of the other divisions or barriers we like to erect. Can you see why it's so important for us to recognize the Magi as being so very different from the righteous Jews, and how they were the ones who paid true homage to Christ, the real King? So that we can recognize and understand that God's mercy and grace in Christ Jesus is available to every single person not just in this room, not just in the West End, not merely in Vancouver, not even exclusively in that part of North America now labeled ‘JesusLand’, but God's mercy and grace in Christ Jesus is freely available to every person on the face of this lovely planet. Then, and only then, when we realize the magnitude and the scope of God's love in Christ will we be truly able to begin to believe that maybe, just maybe, it's really true – that that love, grace, mercy and forgiveness is freely offered and readily available to us as well.

Thanks be to God that His Son Jesus has come as a light for all the nations, and shines the light of His love upon us, and into our hearts. May we use that light to illumine the lives of those who still live in the darknesses of fear, self-loathing, oppression and abuse, grief, loneliness and pain, and may that light illuminate their path to find the Christ-child.