

“For All the Nations” – Mat 2:1-12 – Epiphany – Jan 2/05

As we enter into this New Year the world’s attention has been inexorably drawn to the tsunami disaster in South Asia. That tragedy continues to emerge as the largest ‘natural’ disaster in recorded history. The estimates of the number of people killed continue to rise, and the exact number will never be known, as even entire villages have been wiped from the shorelines of the countries hit by the waves that were triggered by a huge undersea earthquake. The devastation is immense; the impact on literally millions of people is beyond our capacity to imagine – the mind goes numb trying to come to grips with the suffering, the grief, the shock.

The newspapers and television media continue to portray the scenes of tragedy – Friday’s paper talked about a local family with more than 72 relatives missing – but the media have also been trying to include the happier incidents – today’s Sun shows that a Swedish family who had been highlighted in earlier pictures had actually survived. Their story, however, is rare, which is what makes it news – the killed and the still-missing are the norm for tens of thousands of people.

If there is one larger piece of ‘good news’ that can be seen in this unprecedented catastrophe, it is the reaction of the world community. Many if not all of the boundaries that separate people have been set aside, at least for the moment. The relief and aid is pouring in regardless of the differences in age, gender, social status. People all over the world are responding in ways that reveal they consider differences race or religion to be irrelevant in the midst of such suffering. Even political differences have been set aside for the moment – for example, the Province of Banda Aceh in Indonesia, the closest and hardest hit area, has suffered for several years under civil war, but at the moment the government troops and the rebels work together, for they have suffered the same disaster, and are now sharing the burden of helping others, and even each other. The need to respond for the “common good” of all who suffer clearly transcends all of the artificial boundaries of nationality or race or religion. When a tragedy of this magnitude affects the people of the world, most people realize that there is no place for saying, “we can’t help them, they’re some of ‘those’ people.”

Unfortunately this will probably not last, because some people will continue to see boundaries between themselves and others, will continue to erect boundaries that exclude others from receiving the grace to which they see themselves alone as being entitled. These are people who need to hear again the story of the magi’s visit to the infant Jesus, for this is a story about taking down the boundaries and the barriers between peoples.

As with so many of the bible stories, and especially the ‘well-known’ bible stories, we need to hear this story with fresh ears. In order to 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 – 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, men of great intellectual integrity, of renowned scholastic repute, who have wrestled with irrefutable facts and rock-solid rationality. Matthew, while a little bit

nervous about touting the magi as such, nevertheless 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, and that is a whole lot less messier than studying the innards of chickens or whatever, but for all of that they are good old-fashioned astrologers. As I mentioned, Matthew was a bit uncomfortable about their role, even if he wanted to show that their interpretations were right about having seen “his star at its rising” and connecting that with the birth of Jesus, and so 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. Their unusual powers of ESP and perception return quickly, however, as 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, 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 in many ways 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? They are 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 light their path to find the Christ-child.