

Epiphany Sunday – Jan 8/06 - “Beacon of Hope” – Mat 2:1-12

As we enter into this New Year it seems pretty clear that the world continues much as it always has. Conflict and war continues unabated, inspired by economic ideology, political ideology and religious ideology. Scandals continue to abound in the business world, in the political world, and in the religious world, even in or even especially in those groups who claim to be the ‘true purists’, the untouched by corruption, the ‘divinely appointed’ leaders.

And when deceit and spin doctors no longer manage to sway the crowds into believing that the current crop of business, political and religious leaders are true gifts from God, then tough talking and tough action soon follow. Threats to their power are quickly identified, sought out, targeted and eliminated – if not by the pen then by the sword.

Of course, this is nothing new – this is the way the world has been run (some would say mis-managed) as far back as the human story has been told. From the first homicide rising out of the dawn of awareness, through tribal conflicts, and into the age of national identities and global religions, secret torture, mass murder and genocide have been used by corrupt leaders of all types to eliminate threats and maintain their desperate grasp on power. It would be easy to become discouraged with all of this, to feel that the human situation is somewhat hopeless.

That is perhaps the most important reason why we need to hear yet again the story of the magi’s visit to the infant Jesus, to hear within it Matthew’s description of this new light unto the nations, this beacon of hope shining into the world.

Just as we hear the world’s troubled story with jaded ears, we also hear the Gospel stories with less than enthusiasm. As is the case 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 just who these ‘magi’ – these magical men – were. If we are led astray by the hymn into thinking that they were kings we miss a key point 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 not a single scrap of evidence in the bible that they were kings, and to call them kings moves us away from Matthew’s intention.

And even if we use that more common term of “wise men” we weaken what Matthew was trying to tell us. 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 – kind of like my classmates, or even, perhaps, me! Matthew wants you to be in no doubt that these magi are indeed astrologers, diviners of magical signs and omens who can read the mysterious happenings of the universe in the heavens. They use the positions of moon, planets and stars to calculate and compute the whichness of what (or at the very least the ultimate meaning of life), and that is a whole lot less messier than studying the innards of chickens or lizards or whatever!

However, as is often the case with astrology, their techniques were not 100% reliable, for even though they had divined that the new king-child was born, they had to stop to ask for directions in Jerusalem. Herod, ever-helpful Herod, checked with his religious advisors who informed him that the messiah was expected to be born in Bethlehem, and he passed that information on to the wealthy

astrologers, who with renewed confidence followed both this new piece of direction and the accompanying star which had reappeared, to Bethlehem. Matthew seems a bit uncomfortable about the role of these magical diviners, even if he wanted to show that their interpretations were right about having seen “his star at its rising” and having connected that event with the birth of Jesus, and so in addition to an religious prophecy we have them literally following a moving star that appeared when they were in Jerusalem, and which led them to Bethlehem. Their unusual powers of ESP and perception return quickly, however, as they subsequently 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 major earthquake or 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 they could somehow detect that something heavenly had happened. This is a profound and fascinating way for Matthew to tell us that the birth of Christ affected the whole world even in ways that we cannot understand.

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? Those religious leaders of Israel had the theoretical knowledge - they were able to quote from the prophets as to where the Messiah would be born, but obviously failed to do anything with that knowledge. 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 intensely wants us to see clearly that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Christ, unique in his relationship with God right from his birth, the very fulfillment of prophecy, and also that his birth had global, even cosmic, earth-shaking consequences. Into a world of devious political leaders, of self-serving religious leaders, the Christ-child was born as a beacon of hope, a light of God’s saving love into the darkness of human frailty. A light that crossed all borders, a beacon that reached beyond the Israelites to draw the whole world. Matthew’s implication is clear – in the gift of His Son Jesus, God acted for the ‘greater good’ of all nations and all peoples. The grace and mercy offered by God in Christ crosses all boundaries of ethnicity, of race, of colour, of location, of history. That doesn’t mean that we can’t or shouldn’t celebrate our various histories (at least the good parts), or 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 Matthew presenting the Magi as being so very different from the righteous Jews, and how those non-Jewish foreigners were the ones who paid true homage to Christ, the real King? That recognition is important so that we can recognize and understand 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 to the south of us who would like to be known as ‘JesusLand’? It is vitally important to realize that God’s mercy and grace in Christ Jesus is world-wide, freely available to every person on the face of this lovely planet.

God's gift of grace was born into a world covered too much by the darkness of greed, and deceit, and oppression and cruelty, delivered as a beacon of hope in the Christ-child. The light from that beacon spread across the whole world, and continues to shine today. Of course the darkness is still there too, but it has not, will not, cannot, overcome the light of God's love for us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. 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. Let us shine the light of his love to illuminate the lives of those who still live in the darkneses of fear, self-loathing, oppression and abuse, grief, loneliness and pain, providing for them a beacon of hope.