

5 January 2014 Epiphany

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3: 1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

Is the gospel we read and hear the same gospel that Matthew sought to tell?

It is helpful to consider what we hear, and equally helpful to ponder what we are actually listening to when the gospel is being read.

Do we find an insight into the life, the person and the revelation of Christ? Do we find insight and wisdom?

And in particular, in the season of Christmas and on the threshold of a new year do we find a sense of direction, or an insight into the new creation that is heralded in the nativity scene.

All good questions, and hopefully in their asking we will find an invitation to more critically look at the whole narrative of Christmas.

There are a number of ways that we can read, or hear, today's gospel:

1. We can read and explore what Matthew was seeking to convey to his audience.
2. We can read the same in light of the more familiar interpretation that is the common, familiar and orthodox understanding. And
3. We can leave behind these past, traditional, comprehensions and seek to encounter for ourselves an insight for today that gives us an orientation toward tomorrow.

Matthew's original version for his original audience has some interesting insights that provide us with an appreciation of how Matthew had encountered Christ and also how that both resonated with his faith expectation and at the same time questioned that same faith's traditional orthodoxy.

Once again we can see that Matthew uses Isaiah as his backdrop when he is developing his nativity story; and we should stay mindful that this is a Matthew created narrative of the birth of Jesus, it is not the recoding of an event.

So Matthew underlines the prophetic expectations for the Messiah; *Bethlehem of Judea* is the place for that fulfils the expectation that the Messiah would be of the house of David...

And the star and the Kings with their gifts are very much in parallel with the Isaiah passage we had as our first reading.

Matthew is inviting his faith community to see that Jesus, by his very birth, was their Messiah; however there is also a hint that already he knows that they are not ready to let go and go into the beyond that their Messiah would bring to them... It is easier to hold on to the expectation, the waiting, for that requires nowhere near the effort that might be asked once the Messiah actually arrives.

Now the arrival of the Kings, in accord with Isaiah's prophesy, could have been a very acceptable arrival.

"For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 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."

It could have been acceptable if Matthew had chosen acceptable “Kings”, but instead he has “*wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"*” The “wise men” are more correctly “magi”, and here’s a definition of Magi:

Magi (Ancient Greek: μάγος magos) is a term, used since at least the 6th century BC, to denote followers of Zurvanism or Zoroaster.

Starting later, presumably during the Hellenistic period, the word Magi also denotes followers of what the Hellenistic chroniclers incorrectly associated Zoroaster with, which was – in the main – the ability to read the stars, and manipulate the fate that the stars foretold. However, Old Persian texts, pre-dating the Hellenistic period, refer to a Magus as a Zurvanic, and presumably Zoroastrian, priest.

The point of the definition is to identify that Matthew chooses unacceptable “kings” to fulfill this Prophecy of Isaiah, for these Eastern magician/priests would have disturbed devout Jews; they believed that the use of any form of divination, astrological or otherwise was forbidden, as something offensive and abhorrent to the Lord. And the more specific meaning of the word “magos” referring to a member of the Persian priestly caste, the rulers and practitioners of the distinctive religions of Babylon would have been further cause for disturbance among the devout.

It does however give us some insight into the turmoil of the gospel writer; how does Matthew, and how do we, make manifest a new creation, a going beyond to those who have invested so much in being where they are?

Now we might have a quick look at what the Church has done with this gospel narrative. And as we look at the Orthodox understanding, we might appreciate that any “orthodox” perspective is by its very nature is unenlightened...

It is perhaps more useful to refer to the orthodox Church (and orthodox understanding) as the primitive church (and a primitive perspective)...

The early Church (and still the majority of the contemporary church) saw this gospel narrative as actually descriptive of the event of Jesus’ birth.

It formulated the number of Kings (magi actually) as three, even though there is no mention of numbers in the text, and it has given them names, Caspar, Melchior and Belthasar; by naming them it makes them more real and so underlines and adds weight to the literalism that was adopted by the primitive church.

Matthew had slipped in the gift of Myrrh, that was not in Isaiah’s text (he only had the gold and frankincense) and again the primitive church through Origen interpreted these symbolic gifts: “*gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to a God.*”

The primitive church has given us a Christmas card understanding of what it saw as an actual historical event, going a little deeper it did use the Magi to make manifest the inclusion of Gentiles into the Jewish tradition and that was likely an intention that Matthew had written into his narrative; unlike Luke who only included locals in his telling of the story.

What the primitive Church did emphasise was the worshipping of Jesus, and that was an included intention of Matthew whose tradition was of “Worshipping God”, and so he tells of the arrival of the Magi:

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.” As an aside you might want to wonder why he is now in the house, and not in the stable.

Another translation reads *“and falling they worshipped him”*, and that sets the scene for the emphasis on Jesus worship that prevails in the Church, a holding on to the primitive ‘attitude’ of those with a BC(BCE) rather than an AD worldview.

Now let’s consider the third ‘reading’ of the text; leaving behind these past, traditional, comprehensions and seeking to encounter for ourselves an insight for today that gives us an orientation toward tomorrow.

As a story written back, to give light to how Jesus was actually encountered there are some delightfully simple insights that the nativity scene provides, and in particular, the Epiphany; which is an experience of sudden and striking realization..

The star symbolises an orientation to that which sheds light in the darkness, the guiding provided by that which is a light in the heavens.

And the wise ones, the Magi suggest that illumination and realisation will come from beyond our own tradition.

The manifestation of the reality of Christ is to be recognised and seen by those outside of the Church tradition- they will bring us enlightenment; and they will therefore bring us out of our orthodoxy, out primitive worldview.

And rather than an emphasis on *“they knelt down and paid him homage”*; we might read the next sentence with more emphasis:

“opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

This surely is a reflection by humanity of the very act of Divine birth, God the creator empties godself and gives birth, God gives all of godself into the manger of humanity...

The Magi respond by undertaking the same Divine activity for themselves, they empty themselves, they give their wealth, their gifts, into the manger of humanity, and by that very action, Christ is revealed to the world.

Mathew had his own intentions in writing the gospel, the primitive church, then and now, created Christmas cards from his story, but the reality of the insights that this Divine icon holds is truly stunning.

In the giving of ourselves we will make manifest Christ in the world....