

Epiphany 1 January 2017

[Isaiah 60: 1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14 ; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 2:1-12](#) | Vanderbilt Divinity

The first reading from Isaiah is a poetic reflection from the prophet and although nothing to do with the Nativity narrative it can readily be seen that Isaiah's reflections have been woven into the gospel narratives of the Nativity.

We hear "*the glory of the LORD has risen upon you*"; the very same 'glory' that appeared over the shepherds watching their flocks.

And then we hear "*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn*" and so the gospel writers weave into their story the journey of the Kings to the place of the Advent star. "*They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD*"; obviously Isaiah did not need to include the third gift of Myrrh as his poem did not require a link to the Easter narrative and myrrh was used by the gospel writers as the perfume in which the body of Jesus was wrapped.

So we can see in the reading from Isaiah and ancient telling of the same process of enlightenment that we find in the much later nativity narratives of the gospels; Isaiah proclaims a new worldview, and a new movement ; "*Arise, shine; for your light has come*".

Next Sunday we will have another telling of the same process but set into a different story, that of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist; and it is recognising these stories as timeless icons of enlightenment, rather than actual documentary events that we can begin to see that these are stories of a mystical nature that illuminate for us the very movement of life and humanity's unfolding and evolution.

When we look again at the Psalm we can perhaps hear it echoed in coffee shops and church discussion groups around the world; it is a cry for equity and justice; and for a new order of governance.

And it is a cry recently heard in the UK with Brexit and in the USA who found their whole process of government 'trumped'.

In the ancient Near East, kings were next to gods and held great power over their peoples; and yet here in the Psalm there is a cry for change, and a cry that the Governing authority might "*judge your people rightly: and the poor of the land with equity*".

Once again, this Psalm, like the reading from Isaiah, has been woven into the gospel accounts of the Nativity. "*10 The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring tribute: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.*"

This verse gives us the 'Three Kings' that the early church adopted as more colourful than the un-numbered "wise men from the East" mentioned in the gospels; and so these are the representative trio that are to be found at the manger, the place where "*11 All kings shall fall down before him: and all nations do him service.*"

The psalm's expressed desire for change reflects the very same desire that we found in Isaiah's poetry; a desire for a new appreciation and understanding of 'God':

“6 May he come down like rain upon the new-mown fields: and as showers that water the earth.”
“8 His dominion shall stretch from sea to sea: from the Great River to the ends of the earth.”

We can easily miss the radical nature of the desires and understandings being expressed by both Isaiah and the psalmist, for they go way beyond the accepted understanding of the day and challenge the whole Judaic tradition.

Here a totally new understanding of God is being expressed; a God who is ‘earthed’ and not heaven-bound’, a God soaked into creation *like rain upon the new-mown fields* and not one who is ‘above’ and distant; and a universal God who is undivided by the possessiveness of simplistic religions.

In the second reading we see that the teaching of this new paradigm is what has landed Paul in prison; and new and different views still isolate individuals today from the rest of society.

Paul is teaching the emerging church a new understanding he has found revealed in and through Christ; and in simple terms he seeks to close the gap between the entrenched ‘us and them’ that still blinkers most religious traditions today.

Paul is not looking to rearrange the Church furniture, rather he is emphasising a whole new order when he says; *“In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind”*; and yet somehow the early, emerging church managed to hold on to the old order with an almost gravitational resistance to change.

When Paul speaks of the “mystery’ that has been revealed he speaks in contemporary and challenging terms: *“it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*

If Paul were speaking today his reference points might be the current ‘us and them’ differentiations that still leave the Christmas revelation unwrapped and in the manger; the visa restrictions imposed on ‘them’ aliens and refugees, the denial of equality and acceptance to ‘them’ in the LGBT community; the fear of those identified as ‘them’ Muslims and all the other us and them divisions that we’ve still not evolved beyond.

What is most challenging perhaps for us is that, in verse 10, Paul expected that the vehicle for change, and the force for closing the gap, would be the Church: *“so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”*

As we read the story of the Epiphany in today’s gospel we might be mindful of two dictionary definitions for ‘Epiphany’:

noun: Epiphany

- 1. the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12).*
- 2. a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization.*

And with those definitions in mind, we might consider what is being made manifest for us, and what is being revealed or realised, made real.

The desires of both Isaiah and the Psalmist give us clues; Paul's imprisonment perhaps conveys the importance and the enormity of what we are looking for; and both the Nativity narrative and the auspicious timing, the start of a New Year all provide parts of our contemplative jigsaw.

At the altar today the elements we have recently encountered are brought together; the Christmas tree, the very top of the tree, the three crowns for the Kings, the two children Omar and Alan who represent the child in the manger, the candles of Advent and the Christ candle a reminder of both journey and destination, and the unwrapped present that signifies a gift has been received.

The gospel provides us with a symbolic narrative for contemplation and the more we can enter this narrative the more we will discover an opportunity to truly make this a New Year.

If the story were truly about three Kings carrying presents to the new born Jesus, then surely Herod would have joined them; and his inaction is most telling for Kings don't leave the security of their palaces, they get others to do that sort of thing.

So let's go back to the original text and stay with the "wise ones"; and see that they represent a wise and enlightened humanity; that recognises the reality that God is enfleshed and no longer 'in heaven'. And see also the action of the wise ones is to leave the security of their homeland, to travel, to move beyond and to bring themselves and all that have as an offering; and giving into the New Creation.

We are being asked to contemplate giving ourselves fully into the creation of a tomorrow that realises our deepest desires.

We are to come with our 'gold', abundance of wealth, our Frankincense the incense of our prayers and with our Myrrh a sign that our mortality points toward eternity; and we come, journeying together toward the place of tomorrow's Divine birth and our Divine birth.

Let's seek more than a Happy New Year and realise a Divine New Year.

Peter Humphris