

Epiphany 2021, Observed on the 2nd January.

Today we are marking the end of the Christmas season with the celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany, with the story as told by Matthew of the visit of the three wise men or were they three kings as the carol by the same name goes. There is not a shred of evidence to support the popular view that there were three kings, nor for that matter that there were three. There may have been more or less. Probably the best we can offer is to say that someone, and probably Matthew the writer of the gospel, linked the three gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh to the idea that there must have been three wise men and hence the tradition developed. Most likely they were astronomers from Babylon who heard about the promised messiah from earlier Jewish writings. This is story that Mathew has constructed to influence the audience to whom he is writing and teaching and I am not suggesting that my comments about the three kings distracts in any way from the central of Matthew's message of the coming of God in human form among God's people. The crowds however who gather for Christmas are not to be seen today awaiting the arrival of the Magi at the manger.

Such a romantic as I am, I still believe that Christmas should be observed in a way which marks not only the birth of Jesus but also the Feast of St John, St Stephen and the Holy Innocents culminating in the Feast of the Epiphany we are observing today. The pre Christmas frenzy of our times both religious and non-religious that goes into Christmas eve and Christmas day contributes to the virtual neglect of the days following which fill out the fullness of the Christmas message which reminds us that the child born at Bethlehem becomes the crucified Christ of Good Friday. The full message of Christmas is therefore only partly heard, and the significance of the feast overlooked. As I noted in the email I sent out on Friday after a visit to the bank where I had to inform the teller that we still were only half through Christmas. Ugh! I went to a catholic school he said, and I never heard that before. One can understand why when we see Hot Cross Buns on Sale now for Easter.

The Magi visit, and then leave for home. Matthew tells us that once they had presented their gifts at the stable, more precisely the downstairs room in the house reserved for animals and guests they return home by another route to avoid Herod. As I re read the passage I wondered what the Magi must have been thinking. They were certainly aware and wary of Herod's intention. I wonder what

happened when they arrived home. Were their lives changed forever? How did they tell their experiences to others?

In the days before Christmas this year a number of articles appeared in our daily newspapers, in homilies at carol service in churches and shopping centres and on numerous social networking blogs and sites spelling out , or at least attempting to spell out the meaning of Christmas for the 21st Century. While a number of these debunked or sought to deconstruct Christmas from its religious and faith heritage others suggested that there was much more to Christmas than presents, family reunions and conviviality. A few years ago Michael Leung, Age cartoonist, theologian and philosopher and very frustrating at time, in an article titled “Bush Christmas with butterflies and child,” wrote these words at the beginning, “Christmas comes to urban Australia and up goes the decorations- the holly and the Reindeer motifs, the sleighs, the Santas and snowflakes-the same old incongruous winter symbols, reminding Australians their summer is well underway and the year is fading fast. The lives of little pine trees are cut short and hung with baubles”.

He concluded with these words,

“For joy and meaning we might well turn to our natural country and witness miracles of vitality and new life of inspiration and profound beauty, all in some quiet and improbable place”.

It was these last words that resonated with me as I read Leunig’s article once again, “all in some quiet and improbable place”.

It is these sentiments that Matthew in today’s Gospel of the visit of the Magi wants us to hear afresh. It is the story of an encounter with the Divine, the vulnerability and brutality of our times associated with being human. The Magi knew what they were looking for. They had come to pay their respects. They are not kings, but rather seekers after truth, and they represent the fullness of all humanity as seekers and sojourners through out life. Their visit to the Christ child is a poignant and momentous part of the Christmas story, an historical fact, not myth as some miss informed commentators speak about that has changed the face of humanity over the ages and in so many ways and influenced our values and hope for a better world. The Magi understood this and is why they returned a different way and did not tell Herod. God in the stable, in the warmth and familiarity of

a mother's love has come among us to share our common humanity. The world could never be the same again and the Magi knew and understood the significance of the moment.

Matthew tells us that in the birth of the child our rational and scientific left, or is it the right brain cells, pushes the boundaries of faith and belief to a new level. The birth of the Christ child is no sentimental or nostalgic event but rather a shattering event turning the world upside down where the meek and lowly are raised and the powerful and rich challenged. Herod understood the significance of the birth, as does the powerful today with their attempts to distort and marginalise the call of faith to justice for all.

We may ask ourselves the question, how does this story of the birth of the Christ child impact on our own lives? Is the celebration of Christmas simply a feel-good experience?

The Magi are seeking after truth, which is why they are following the star. Herod sees the threat. He represents evil, a reminder to us that the birth of Jesus occurred in an occupied country ruled by a despot. Similar circumstances still exist for millions of people, including children today. We can be smug, disengaged to the plight of abused

children sold into slavery or the sex trade, workers exploited and abused, asylum seekers and refugees form the comfort of our armchairs and charitable giving. The birth of the Christ child evoked fear among the exploiters and the abusers of the time, including both the political and religious leaders of the time. Already the seeds are sown for his death.

The Season of Christmas culminates in today's celebration of the arrival of the Magi. The Gospel reminds us of the brutality and exploitation of the regime in control, and the vulnerability of the birth. So, what do we take away? Can we truly say this Christmas has changed how we think and act as Christians in today's world? Or are we like so many Australians caught up in the marketing and the "razza a ma taz " of Christmas that we miss the wonder of God's presence in our own lives , because like Herod it challenges who we are, what we believe and what we think important. The message of peace and goodwill towards others is more than a pious, nostalgic story we bring out once a year. It is to be the cornerstone or lynch pin of all we do. It is about our relationships with one another, the stranger, and the whole of created. It is the giving of ourselves for the other, as a mother does for her child without conditions and

expectations. A reminder to us that our humanity is diminished, and our redemption hampered when we ignore the sharing of light with others. A light that shines which comes from a quiet and improbable place. Or in the words of the prologue to John's Gospel.

“In the beginning was the word and the word was with God-----. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it: the word was made through him and the world did not know him, and his own did not know not receive him.”

Let me conclude with some words from Desmond Tutu who died recently, man of the people and man of God, a truly energetic and **passionate church leader of our times.**

“We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not

educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all.

We all belong to this family, this human family,

God's family.”

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Amen