

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Today we have the first revelation of Christ to the Gentiles - the wise men from the East come following a star and find a child.

It's suggested now that early scholars reconstructed the characteristics of the magi to represent different races and highlight God's universal rule and call, and used symbolism in the gifts. "Melchior" was described as "an old man with white hair and a long beard," "Gaspar" "young and beardless and ruddy complexioned," and "Balthasar" was "black-skinned and heavily bearded." Gold was appropriate for a king, frankincense "an oblation worthy of divinity," and myrrh "testified to the Son of Man who was to die." (Venerable Bede 672–735) However there are long traditions of foreign visitors attending the birth of Christ, so we cannot disregard that truth lays under the story.

In the story, we have an important theme from the Hebrew Bible - God's universal sovereignty and love. We are meant to understand that God has a plan for creation, for humanity, bigger than we had imagined. It's a revelation - a light bulb moment - an epiphany !

The Wise Men

To understand the background of the story, we begin with the exiles from Judah as they wait in Babylon for the word that will send them home. In the middle of the sixth century before Christ, things seemed as dark as they had ever been, with little to sustain hope. God's people were far from their land; the temple had been destroyed; and the dynasty of David has come to an end.

Isaiah describes the deep joy they felt at the promise from King Cyrus of Persia that they could return to their land. His message was that the nations that had dominated them would come to kneel before them; the exiles would return; lost sons and daughters would be gathered together. The prophet describes how the sea to the west would pour its abundance into the land, that the desert to the east with the wealth of camel caravans bringing gold and frankincense would pour wealth into Jerusalem. The poverty and shame of exile will be overcome when as the wealth of the world poured in and the city of exiles became a light to the nations. Isaiah calls out, "Arise, shine; your light has come!" Stand up and look what's coming!

Did you hear that this light was not for Israel alone? "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Throughout the OT, God used foreigners, outsiders, women, the least expected and sometimes most unsavoury characters to fulfil his plans. The Lord was always the ruler over all humanity, whether they acknowledged him or not, and from the beginning he intended to bless all the families of the earth through the covenant with Abraham - all nations were to be blessed through the Patriarch. The blessings of God were always meant to be shared.

Flip over to the NT.

When Matthew describes the wise men he draws on the rich imagery of Isaiah. The exiles listening to Isaiah probably imagined Israel's oppressors bowing down before the restored nation, paying tribute as vassals, in humiliation. Matthew preserves the imagery, but there's some shifts. The nations come to the light of Israel to bow down before a different kind of king who brings a different sort of kingdom. Angels sing, but the child is born to an engaged woman from a backwater town, his step father is a carpenter not a king, and he is lying in a bed of straw with the livestock, not on satin sheets.

But Jesus the Christ is not some regional celebrity, or a tradesman who made good, he *is* the new king of Israel, he is and always has been the sovereign ruler over all the earth. In him, at last, God's promise that Israel will be a light to the nations is fulfilled. In him God's grace calls to every last one of God's beloved children who will come from every compass point to worship him, and to dine at the heavenly banquet.

Epiphany tells us that even in his infancy Jesus is for all humanity, not only for the chosen few. He is for the outsiders and he comes to draw people together: wise men from the East, Syrians from the north, Egyptians from the south, Romans from the west. Jesus reveals the extent and depth of God's love which cannot be confined to ethnic or national identity; it cannot be restricted by gender or claimed only by the powerful and privileged.

Arise, Shine

Isaiah reminds us to be conscious that we stand in a privileged place. We are privileged, not because of any skill we have, nor because of our worth, but because God directed his light in our direction. Because his Son came into the world to lead us into the light, to push back the darkness, to establish a new day and a path to a new future.

There's responsibility that comes with this, for those on whom light is shining can see things others cannot yet see: the abundance, colour, and exuberance of life in the new realm. They see the future rectification of the world, when injustices are put right and true peace, harmony and order is restored by God as it was meant to be. And they have begun to experience these things already.

Isaiah asks us to look around and see what has begun and rejoice, and Matthew invites us to pay homage to the one who has made it so, though he is yet a baby in a manger, he is the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings and he will return to bring things to completion.

We are also reminded that God's light shines in a darkness which is real and pervasive. Now, we don't live in Babylon, and though some in our Parish are exiles most of us are not. Nevertheless our western world, our nation, our region, has enough darkness of its own. Even at Christmas, even on the Surfcoast, in our relative safety and stability.

As God's people we are called to worship the Lord and walk in his ways and share the news we have heard, the hope we have received, the future that awaits us.

Arise, Shine!

"You have the light...Get into that darkness and start shining." Bring Christ's light to others. The community of God is not meant to be a gated community with an all access pass to good things for insiders. The community of God are those with a new vision who are seeking the lost, the sick and the weary, the ones who are offering healing and wholeness, reconciliation and redemption. We are a community of people who have found life and hope, who have come to know their creator, who have glimpsed his plans for creation, and are eager invite others to share in their discovery. We are a community of disciples following their Lord, doing as he did, reaching out to others in need of assistance, searching for truth, dissatisfied with life; serving others around them, without discrimination, with enthusiasm, with compassion, with kindness and generosity.

True Disciples

Matthew contrasts the magi, who sincerely pay homage to the "king of the Jews", with Herod, who claims to be "king of the Jews" and seeks to destroy the true king. The issue is not what birthright you have, but what kind of disciple you will become in light of the Christ, however faint your understanding might be. The visitors know Jesus only from prophecy and general information. Nevertheless, they are model believers.

Later in Matthew Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:14, 16). And the Gospel ends with an image similar to the one we have here. The disciples are paying "homage" to the risen Lord (28:17) and receive the command to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

Looking at the plans of God revealed in the Epiphany and the message of the Gospel, we are challenged to worship the King we have heard of, to honour him and find ways to follow his commands. To find ways to shine, to stand up in the darkness, and to declare, in word and deed, the grace shown to us.

The Father has a plan for creation, for humanity, bigger than we had imagined, his love reaches to every corner of the world and he has invited us to spread the word. We are Israel taking note of what the Lord is doing, we are the wise men bringing our offerings, we are the Church remembering the light is meant for all, to be shared with all.

Let us celebrate that because of this light any seeker, whether by chance or dogged pursuit, can find his or her way to the manger. In Jesus Christ all are invited. This is the extent of God's love, poured out, overflowing in our cups. Praise him and share the joy.

Summary

In today's Gospel, we have an important theme - God's universal sovereignty and love. We understand that God has a plan for creation, for humanity, bigger than we had imagined. It's a revelation - a light bulb moment - an epiphany ! It is the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, a fulfilment of the promise to Abraham - the wise men from the East come following a star and find the promised child who will be King of all who will bring peace and blessing to all.

Isaiah provides the background: as the exiles from Judah wait in Babylon for the word that will send them home and things seemed as dark as they had ever been. He calls "Stand up and look what's coming!" And when Matthew describes the wise men he draws on the rich imagery of Isaiah.

Epiphany tells us that even in his infancy Jesus is for all humanity, not only for the chosen few. He is for the outsiders and he comes to draw people together: wise men from the East, Syrians from the north, Egyptians from the south, Romans from the west. Jesus reveals the extent and depth of God's love which cannot be confined to ethnic or national identity; it cannot be restricted by gender or claimed only by the powerful and privileged. God's grace calls to every last one of God's beloved children who will come from every compass point to worship him, and to dine at the heavenly banquet.

Looking at the plans of God revealed in the Epiphany and the message of the Gospel, we are challenged to worship the King we have heard of, to honour him and find ways to follow his commands. We must find ways to shine, to stand up in the darkness, and to declare, in word and deed, the grace shown to us.

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