



Sermon - The Epiphany, Sunday December 31, 2023

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Our wise men, our kings, our philosophers, have moved from their symbolic journey from the east to their place with Mary, Joseph, and the new-born Messiah in the stable. On Saturday, we join the secular world in that time of the year called “after Christmas” as we close off the Christmas season on the actual date of the Feast of the Epiphany, which we in the Anglican Church in Australia have come, in fairly recent times, to routinely celebrate on the Sunday before the sixth of January as we do this year, rather than hold a mid-week service in the middle of the summer holiday period. Two years ago, we did not have to play around with the thirteenth day of Christmas in order to celebrate it on a Sunday; it *was* on a Sunday - the next time that will occur is in 2030 – two years after the next time the Fourth Sunday of Advent coincides with Christmas Eve.

Christ’s birth in poverty helps us to understand that God is in this world for all the people of the world as we explored at Christmas. But it has other, broader, perhaps less apparently socio-political meanings for us too. We need to allow the images of the Gospel to speak to us - we are called to be open to new ways of seeing those images each time we hear them which, given that the Epiphany readings are the same each year, will be at least annually for today’s readings.

The message of the Scriptures will also be contextual. How do the Scriptures, both from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the New Testament speak into our present circumstances?

Matthew was, as we have already seen from the Gospel readings in Advent and Christmas, very focussed on the prophecy of the Old Testament prophets and what they have to say about Jesus and about what Jesus’ presence among the people of Matthew’s generation meant.

It is out of that tradition that the question from the magi is born:

‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’

These sages knew that there had been prophecies of the coming of a special king to the people of Israel, and their instincts were supported by the words of the scribes to King Herod about the anticipated birth at Bethlehem:

*“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”*

This short extract from Micah’s prophecy has always been important to Christian scholars, particularly for its reference to the shepherd-king image. So how do we respond to this Epiphany event in Australia in 2023?

I think that we will do well to ponder in our hearts the child and his parents who brought such an incredibly mysterious phenomenon to be found in the stable in Bethlehem, and to ponder the cosmic meaning of that mystery for everyone who has come along since.

What came into the world in that stable was nothing less than the true light of the whole world; the phenomenon of which John was to say:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

In these words John brings together the whole Epiphany mystery; the king is the light of the world – the light of all people, and the darkness, the sin and death of the world, could not overcome that light. This was what the arrival of the wise and learned outsiders from the east said to the world. Matthew's story of good news begins with the birth of the king, the light of the world. In the thwarting of Herod's evil plot, we see that the darkness, right from the beginning, was unable to overcome that light.

Three years ago on this day, I said this:

Many of our fellow Australians have been faced with darkness this week right in the midst of life; right where they have lived their whole lives.

I noted that my father grew up in East Gippsland and I spent many summer holidays in the small community of Orbost, and the even smaller hamlet of Marlo about 16 kilometres down the road, surrounded by the majestic and awe-inspiring forests of that region. I reflected on the fact that my very soul had been seared by what was happening there and in huge areas of our state and other parts of this country. At the urging of our diocesan leaders, we prayed at the beginning of our Epiphany eucharist that morning, that God would come to everyone affected by, and involved in dealing with, the bushfire crisis. We prayed for forgiveness for our shortcomings in our stewardship of God's creation, but above all, we prayed for *"the peace that passes all understanding, in our nation and state, in our homes and in our hearts."* At times like those, I said, we need the peace that the angels proclaimed at Christmas for all the world, but we need to attempt to understand how we can, as the church and as its members, bring the fruits of that peace to those who need it most in this hour, this week, this year – not just thoughts and prayers, but thoughts and prayers accompanied by deeds and resources. Little did I know what was still to come!

Had the fires of January, 2020 not been followed so closely by the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, things would have been bad enough, and we would have had a difficult enough task on our hands to help our fellow Australians in their time of need. But that was not to be the case.

We were visited in 2020, from little more than a month after the feast of the Epiphany, by the darkness of the plague that is Covid 19 and the darkness that many in the world have experienced seems that it will be with us for some time to come. Fortunately, we have been able to access the vaccines which were rolled out, too slowly to save many in communities in less fortunate parts of the world than ours.

How then, do we comprehend the Epiphany message this year? Can we, as I suggested just two years ago, find the Spirit of Epiphany even in the darkness of this even greater human pain and suffering, despair, and loss? Can we do this in the context of a world apparently determined to be at war; compounding the thrall of those Covid days.

Back in 2020, I urged that we commended to God's good care, all who had died in the fires and all who grieved, and still grieve, their loss and the loss of animal companions, and livelihoods, and property. The task is still much the same, as we contemplate the deaths and seemingly permanent physical damage to so many people, and the economic devastation of so many communities and families. In many ways the task's the same, it's really just the scale that is different.

At this time, I remain convinced, just as I was then, that *we must continue to pray that the miracle of Bethlehem will come into the world;* into the world of these fearful and terrible crises. I urge you to join me in praying that we will be inspired, as churches, as communities, and as God's people in this world, to continue to do good, to show God's love and compassion and, by our words and deeds, to ever more powerfully witness to the light of the world, foretold by the prophets, hailed by the angels, proclaimed by shepherds and sages, born to a faithful woman and nurtured by a loving earthly father to be the one who was to become the redeemer of the world.

Let us try to find the Spirit of Epiphany even in this darkness, not just in thoughts and prayers, but indeed in thoughts and prayers accompanied by deeds and resources, both material and spiritual..

In all of this, the Lord be with you.

Richard Murray – December 31, 2023