

Isaiah 60.1-6, Ephesians 3.1-12, Matthew 2.1-12

### Isaiah 60.1-6 The Ingathering of the Dispersed

<sup>1</sup> Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

<sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

<sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

<sup>6</sup> A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

### Ephesians 3.1-12 Paul's Ministry to the Gentiles

<sup>3</sup> This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— <sup>2</sup>for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup>and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, <sup>4</sup>a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. <sup>5</sup>In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: <sup>6</sup>that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup>Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup>and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup>in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

### Matthew 2.1-11 The Visit of the Wise Men

<sup>2</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, '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.' <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> "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." '

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' <sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

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Epiphany: 'Manifestation', manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

*Eph. 3. 8b -10 'to bring to the Gentiles **the news of the boundless riches of Christ,** <sup>9</sup>and to make everyone see what is the **plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;** <sup>10</sup>**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.'***

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I look back to our Christmas Eve Crib service this year with very fond memories of 3 wonderfully dressed wise men coming down the centre aisle of this church followed by a large, friendly camel. The Church was packed with people from many different countries. Anybody who was there will know what I was talking about; the younger children were mesmerised by the camel; would have gladly taken her home after the service— a true celebration of the good news of Christmas.

In our Carol and Crib services at Christmas, we usually conflate Jesus' birth stories from Luke and Matthew gospels, and for many people Christmas is over by 6<sup>th</sup> January, given the tradition of removing Christmas decorations and trees by 12<sup>th</sup> night.

Not so in Church, as you can see. On 6<sup>th</sup> January we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, epiphany meaning 'showing forth' 'manifestation', referring to the showing forth of the Christ to the wider world, beyond the Jewish people. The wise men 'magi' who have travelled from the East are the representatives, but we find this plan – God's offer of salvation to all of humanity, foretold by the prophets and put into practice through the calling of Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. In the season of Epiphany we commemorate Paul's conversion, which itself was an 'epiphany' of Christ that changed the direction of his life.

Today, the Feast of the Epiphany, presents an opportunity to look more closely at Matthew's account of the journey of the wise, and his telling of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew's account of the events surrounding Jesus' birth are much more sombre than Luke's account. Matthew exposes the serious social and political implications of God's action and purposes, whether that's the implications of Mary's unexpected pregnancy for Joseph or the challenge of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, for King Herod, puppet king of the Jews.

Our Lady Margaret Professor at the university here, Professor George van Kooten, who has a particular interest in the geo-political context of the gospels, suggests that Matthew is unique among the gospels in the way he pays attention to the wider political landscape around the time of Jesus' birth, in particular to the tension between Rome and its Eastern neighbours, the Parthians.

The whole area of Syria and Judaea was strategically important because it formed the Eastern-most frontier of the Roman empire against the enemy in the East, Parthia. The Parthians had come into power almost three centuries before the birth of Jesus, and parts of it were Greek-speaking. As Rome was rising, the first century before Christ saw many confrontations between the Parthians and the Romans, which included two major Roman defeats; the Parthians had managed to capture Judaea and Jerusalem and installed a pro-Parthian ruler there, before he was removed by the Romans and Herod the Great was appointed instead as a Roman vassal king.

George van Kooten points out that Jesus lived as near to the time of Parthian-Roman tensions as we do to the time of the second world war.

Awareness of this background enables us to appreciate more fully the significance of the magi's visit.

Van Kooten proposes that the magi were the priests and kingmakers of the Parthians, and in that role they were surveiling the political developments in the Near East. The Parthian-Roman relations had improved by the time of Augustus, which made it more straight forward to travel.

So, Matthew, in his gospel, makes a very powerful point: These men were not blinded or impressed by palaces or the status of emperors. They understood that there is something more important than 'strong men power'. They had come to worship **not** Augustus, **nor** Herod, but this child which had been announced by a star.

These wise men, magi from the East are representing the 'gentiles', all of humanity. The insight into the political constellation gives a deeper appreciation of the radical nature of the gospel here and what God is doing.

Translate it into contemporary world politics, this is like Russian priests going into Ukraine today to worship the saviour of the world – Ukraine as the place between East and West.

Later on, in his gospel, chapter 8 verse 11, Matthew picks up this theme again, in Jesus' encounter with the Roman Centurion, a man of great faith. Jesus tells him 'many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. Here, the West, the Romans are explicitly included in God's saving purposes.

God's vision for the world transcends political, ethnic and even religious boundaries, to create a kingdom in which the 'boundless riches of Christ are brought to everyone, as Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians (3.9b-10) 'to make everyone see what the plan is of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things', <sup>10</sup>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'.

Our bible readings this morning show the 'superabundant grace' ( Ricouer) that God's plan foresees for the world – and, the church is an agent of this.

In the coming weeks, we will continue to ponder the riches of God's grace as we celebrate the baptism of Christ, the conversion of Paul, the week of prayer for Christiana unity; the wedding of Cana and eventually the presentation of Christ in the Temple, with Simeon and Anna rejoicing in the gift of this child to the world, but also foreseeing the resistance and hostility that meet God's plan.

This morning, the contrast between the courageous wise men, seekers, able to look beyond their own boundaries and horizon – and King Herod: self-serving, insecure, fearful, violent – is striking.

When we seek to discern God's presence in the world and in the Church, we have very clear pointers here, as to how and where God is at work: God sees the heart and the intentions; God's purpose is to draw all into the boundless riches of Christ; God's kingdom includes those who may have been enemies and strangers to each other. Whether we are politically active or simply seeking to live out the commandment of 'loving our neighbour as ourselves, we have no excuse to ignore the foreigner and stranger, or anyone who does not fit **our** pre-conceived ideas of what a follower of Christ looks like, - especially those who come to seek shelter and hospitality as victims of discrimination, persecution or war.

As religious people, we are reminded of God's overarching message of Love, inclusion; that God acts, and time and time again surprises God's people.

We may wish that God would interfere more actively to put an end to the many conflicts in the world and in the Church; for it is the Herod's of our day who get the airtime and social media attention. God continues to act – we need to be alert and open as the wise men were, discerning, courageous, generous and humbly worshipful before our God, who is Emmanuel - God with us – yet beyond our imagining. Amen.