

## **Another Road**

Today we back track – last week we read about Jesus as a youth in the temple, today we return to the Christ Child and to the Magi travelling to see him. We celebrate Epiphany this week – the realization of who the baby Jesus is by the Magi is their Epiphany – and we try to celebrate our own epiphanies – the moment or moments in our lives when we finally realize who Jesus is to us, what he means in our lives.

Epiphany is from a Greek word which means *coming to light* or *in full view*. It is a sudden realization of the truth about something – the light bulb shining bright, an **A-Ha** moment when all the pieces fall into place and comprehension is achieved. Epiphany means the sudden awareness, the unexpected appreciation that God is in Christ – that God dwells in the baby. Epiphany is the moment of recognition.

Epiphany is also a celebration of light. We understand the light of our lives to be Jesus Christ. Today we read of the Magi seeing the light of the star of Bethlehem and using that to discover Jesus. We read on Christmas Eve in the gospel of John, *what has come into being through 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.* But even as we understand that Jesus is the light we also hear in scriptures that we are the light. In Matthew's account of Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount, we read of Jesus saying, *you are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others.* Epiphany is about light – the light of Christ that has come to the world to dwell with us, and the light of Christ that dwells within us for which we are responsible.

Epiphany – coming to light – what is coming to light today – with church – with us? Sure, we can understand the idea of a spiritual epiphany, a religious awakening of sorts, but our gospel today is about the visit of the Magi or wise men to the Christ child. How did they come to this pilgrimage and what do we really know about their experience? Why is it even significant?

It cannot be repeated too often that the writers of the Gospels depended to a considerable extent on the Hebrew Scriptures that they knew. The passage from Isaiah is almost certainly the source for Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi bearing gifts for Israel's new born king. Both very ancient and modern depictions of that event and the carol, *We Three Kings*, also take their basic elements from this passage. Isaiah's prophecy presents a clear description of God's activity within human history interpreted metaphorically as giving light where darkness has previously prevailed. The poetry of Isaiah invites his depressed, discouraged contemporaries to look up, to hope and to expect everything to change. *Rise, shine, for your light has come.* This recalls the first act of creation – the creation of light where there had been only chaos and darkness. It also reiterates the theme of another poem in the book of Isaiah at chapter 40: *The glory of the Lord shall be revealed...*

Matthew tells quite a different story about the birth of Jesus than did Luke in the familiar words we read on Christmas Eve. Matthew emphasizes the importance of this visit of the Magi because it symbolizes recognition from non-Jewish figures of prominence that perceive the kingship of Jesus. Matthew searches the Hebrew Scriptures – misconstruing a text from

Micah 5 that the coming of the Messiah had been prophesied by one of Israel's best known prophets – reinterpreting it as a messianic prophecy pointing to Jesus. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to the people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to those on the ground – the common people.

Foreigners, as the magi certainly were, came seeking the newborn king of Israel whose signal star they had been following for some time. They could not have been Jews for they asked Herod questions which a Jew would have already known. Legend has it that they came from the east. From poetic statements in several Old Testament passages, it has been assumed that the magi were kings. They could have been both Zoroastrian priests and kings, as monarchs frequently were in those days.

It all happened a very long time ago when Herod was king and after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Magi probably started on their quest at the time of Jesus' birth and arrived in Jerusalem a year or two later. When they come to Herod he is definitely disturbed – frightened. A new king is a threat to the old king and the old order. Herod feigns benevolent interest in the child, encouraging the Magi to bring word when they find him so that Herod can also go and pay him homage. We know that this can only mean trouble and are relieved to hear of the warning dream that the Magi experience – comforted to learn that they head for home on another path, far from Herod's reach.

We have tended to idealize and romanticize the story in so many ways that we may have neglected its more obvious meaning. We read about the visit of the wise men today not because these visitors were royal, or mysterious, or astrologers, or because they brought Jesus precious, symbolic gifts. It would appear that Matthew told this story to help his audience draw the conclusion that the prophecies being fulfilled by Jesus' birth were about foreign nations coming to Jerusalem to worship Israel's God. The reason these wise men are important in Matthew's eyes, is because they are not Jews – they are Gentiles. They are the first Gentiles to see God in the baby Jesus, the first non-Jews to have the Epiphany experience – to recognize the divine identity of Jesus.

And that recognition is important to us because it is the opening of the doors. The people of Israel have known for a very long time that they are God's chosen, special people. But in Jesus – Emmanuel – the table is widened and extended – the message is surely for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles – the whole world can receive God in a special way now that God has come in person. This is the brilliant light-bulb, the great **A-Ha** that Epiphany shares with us.

*The Journey of the Magi*, which Steve presented to us earlier today's service, is a poem by T. S. Eliot written after Eliot's conversion to Christianity and confirmation in the Church of England in 1927. The poem is an account of the journey from the point of view of one of the magi – a speaker who laments outliving his world. The poem is a complaint about a journey that was painful and tedious. The speaker says that a voice was always whispering in their ears as they went that *this was all folly*. The magi telling the tale seems generally unimpressed by the infant, yet realizes that the incarnation has changed everything.

*...were we led all that way for Birth or Death?*

In the monologue, the man has made his own choice – has achieved belief in the incarnation – but is still part of that life which Jesus comes to sweep away. He cannot break loose from the past. The Birth that is also Death seems not to have brought him hope of a new life, but

has revealed to him the hopelessness of his previous life. The speaker sounds resigned rather than joyous.

The quest of the Magi for the Christ child is a long arduous journey against the discouragements of nature and the hostility of man which ends in a mystery impenetrable to human wisdom.

Throughout the poem there are allegorical reminders of what the birth of Jesus means: the valley of life – the three crosses of Calvary – the White Horse of the Second Coming. There are allusions to the Communion – the paschal lamb whose blood was smeared on the lintels of Israel – the blood money of Judas – the insults suffered by Christ before the Crucifixion – the soldiers casting lots at the foot of the Cross – even the pilgrims at the open tomb in the garden.

The birth of the Christ was the death of the world of magic, astrology, and paganism. The speaker in Eliot's poem, recalling his journey, says that after that birth his world had died – they returned to their kingdoms no longer at ease in the old dispensation. The speaker has reached the end of one world, but despite his acceptance of the revelation as valid, he struggles to enter a world not his own.

Were they led there for Birth or for Death – to make a choice between Birth and Death? Can one happen without the other?

The birth of the Christ is the death of one way of being – it is the end of resting comfortably in the old dispensation. Like Eliot, when we come to know who Jesus is we realize that the incarnation changes everything...

We may fervently hope that the meaning of the story will not be lost at a time when religious traditions seem to clash rather than coalesce around the worship of the God whom we know in Jesus Christ. But who is to say that God will not bring about reconciliation through love for people of all religious traditions? It seems impossible in the chaos and violence and disharmony of our time. As we start this year of our Lord 2010, we need to hold fast to the promise that each year is a new twelve month period of God's infinite and eternal grace.

This birth changes everything. Recognizing the divine identity of Jesus – knowing that God is in Christ and that Christ is in us, renovates our world entirely. Our way of being in a world where God dwells among us and seeks to shine forth from us is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighbourliness, and generosity – a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into ploughshares. The question becomes how we respond to that transformation. Can we willingly and joyfully accept the Lordship of Christ? Will we succumb to the Herod within ourselves – resisting God's power in our lives or can we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed with joy? Can we kneel before Jesus offering our treasure – dying to our life of privilege and embracing God's promise of new life? Can we go home by another road?