

**Sermon for Mount Macedon/Riddells Creek
Epiphany 2010**

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Matthew 2:1-12

Today, admittedly three days early, we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. Epiphany concludes the twelve days of Christmas; it's the end of the season in which we retell stories of Jesus' birth. The word 'epiphany' is currently used to mean any sudden realization; so that if at any time you have a sudden revelation, you can declare that you've had "an epiphany". But the *particular* epiphany that we celebrate on the 6th of January is the revelation to the Gentiles, through the magi, that the One God has been made manifest in the infant Jesus.

In order to hear this story we need to turn to the Gospel of Matthew. As part of my continuing quest to make you the most biblically literate Uniting Church congregations ever, let me remind you of what I've said many times already, that in the four gospels we are given two Nativity stories, and that the two are very different. Matthew takes many of the elements of his nativity from Jewish sources. The main character in his account is Joseph, not Mary, and God communicates with Joseph in dreams, linking with the story of the Hebrew patriarch Joseph, who interpreted dreams in Egypt. Jesus' birth is described as like that of Moses; a child is born who can threaten the ruler; the ruler attempts to meet the threat by murdering all the boys in the community; the child escapes. Matthew's Nativity is a harsher story than Luke's – it ends with the slaughter by Herod of all the boys in and around Bethlehem under the age of two, which is one of the reasons that Luke's story gets preference in Nativity plays.

But Matthew was also writing at a time when the message of the gospel was being taken increasingly to the Gentiles; and so Matthew's particular contribution to the combined Christmas story, the way that Matthew gets into Nativity plays, is the magi. We're not told how many of them there were, nor where in the East they came from, and in Matthew's story they're definitely not kings. It's fascinating to trace that ways that their part in the Nativity developed, until they became the "three kings of Orient" of Christmas carol fame.

As the church became increasingly Gentile, Christians became more interested in these wise men, the only Gentiles in the Nativity. So the early church looked for more information about them, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, where it was assumed that all the circumstances of Jesus' birth had been foretold. We heard two of the passages that became part of the magi's story today. In the prophet Isaiah the early church read that "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Since the only representatives of the nations to come to Jesus' birth were the magi, the early church decided that the magi *must* be kings. Psalm 72, which we also read today, supported this by saying: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." Again, it seemed obvious from this Psalm that the magi who came with gifts must be kings.

The number of these kings was unknown, but there were three gifts, and in Genesis 26 Isaac met three men who recognised that God was with him and made a covenant with him. The third-century theologian, Origen, decided that these three men were symbols of the magi. Ever since, most Christians have accepted that there were three, although in the sixth century, Syrians began to claim that there were twelve, parallelling the twelve Apostles.

A sixth-century chronicle gives the names of the now three kings as Bithisarea, Melchior and Gaspar. Bithisarea was more commonly spelt Balthazar and is probably a corrupted form of the name given to prophet Daniel in the Babylonian Court. Melchior may derive from two Hebrew words, *melek* meaning king and *or* meaning light. Casper or Gaspar may be a corruption of the name Godaphar, a famous Indian king who appears in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. So tradition, and *The Age* newspaper's quiz, now tells us that the three kings from the East who visited Jesus were Balthazar, Melchior and Casper.

Augustine claimed that the wise men represented the entire Gentile world. The Venerable Bede, an Englishman living in the seventh century, decided that this meant that each wise man represented one of the three known parts of the world: Asia, Africa and Europe. From then on, artists often pictured the three kings as Asian, African and European.

One reason I've told you all this is because I love going down the by-ways of history and I'm indulging myself. But the other reason is to emphasise the importance that the church has placed on these unnamed, unknown magi, who appear only in this one section of one gospel. They're important, because they're seen to represent us – the non-Jews who have been drawn to Jesus.

This connection is both good and bad for us. On the one hand, it's the magi and their naïve questioning that tip Herod off about a potential rival. The magi come to Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish power, looking in the wrong place for the wrong kind of king. They find a fearful tyrant, and calmly ask to be directed to another, newly born, king. Herod thinks that *he* is the "king of the Jews," although he's actually a Roman puppet, and his conversation with the magi leads him to slaughter all of the children under the age of two in Bethlehem. For wise men, the behaviour of the magi in Jerusalem is not at all wise.

On the other hand, the magi *do* recognise Jesus as king. They're the wisest people of the Gentile world, and their wisdom leads them to Christ. They've studied the stars, and their scientific investigation has led them to Jerusalem. With the help of the Jewish priests and scribes, they're able to make their way to the very house in which Jesus and Mary live. There's no conflict here between science and scripture. Revelation is born from a combination of natural wisdom and biblical prophecy. And in Matthew's story, the magi are the only people who worship Jesus as he deserves, kneeling down and offering him homage. Despite their blunder in frightening Herod and all Jerusalem, we can accept that the magi truly are 'wise'.

Matthew contrasts these Gentiles who wish to pay homage to Jesus as "king of the Jews," with Herod, who calls himself "king of the Jews" and pretends that he wants to offer Jesus homage, but actually seeks to kill him. For the Gentile church, for the non-Jews in Matthew's community, this is an extremely affirming story. But we ourselves, Gentiles though we might be, might resemble Herod more than we think. Most of us have grown up in the church. Like Herod, unlike the magi, we're insiders rather than outsiders. Again like Herod, and unlike the magi, the scriptures are part of our heritage; we don't need to rely only on our natural wisdom to find God. Does this mean we forget how unlikely the story of the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God in a human child, really is? The magi came looking for a great king, they brought gifts suitable for a man of power: gold, frankincense and myrrh. They found instead a baby in an ordinary house in a small town. They had an epiphany – the revelation of God to the Gentiles. For us, this is an old story. The revelation of God in Jesus is not new to us. But every year, we still celebrate this epiphany. My hope is that this celebration is not just a habit, but a true revelation; that at the Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord we truly have an epiphany. The unnamed, unnumbered magi became the three kings Balthazar, the king of Chaldea, Melchior, the king of Nubia, and Casper, the king of Tarshish, with names and races and royal titles, because they were seen as role models for us. So, let's look at the revelation of God in Jesus with the fresh eyes of the magi, drawing on all our native wisdom, together with the Scriptures, to understand what God is doing for us in Christ. Like the magi, let us show our wisdom through our worship of God in this baby in Bethlehem. Amen.