

## **Sermon - Epiphany**

**Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well it's a pleasure to be here today, preaching on Epiphany at our ecumenical service at the South Yarra Community Baptist Church. I have a small familiarity with the Baptists. For the three years preceding my ordination, I worked for Baptcare in their distinctly ecumenical Mission Development team. My colleagues came from the Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Salvation Army, and Anglican denominations and our unique mission was to support the organization in delivering "fullness of life" for our clients across the many ages and stages of life, cultures and life circumstances. As I reflected on our readings tonight, I wondered what I could say that would help our understanding and faith in the God who came to live among us as Jesus Christ, as the epiphany or revelation to the whole world. And as I browsed the substantial resources on the LaughingBird website, I marveled at the richness of the text, and how it had been interpreted in 14 previous sermons!

Yes, I was somewhat daunted, but steadied myself in the knowledge that God would give me inspiration. It was interesting to see the 14 sermons, providing a reminder of the continuity and steadfastness of God's message over the years. And there are also common messages in our readings from Isaiah, Ephesians and the Gospel, a time span of not just 14 years but 800 years. So tonight, I want to draw out the theme of journey and how God's message of love is there for everyone, as prophesied by Isaiah, called out

by Matthew in his account of the Magi and discerned by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians.

Well, journeys come in many forms. Perhaps at the biggest level, we have the cosmic journey of God's love for the world, from creation, to covenant and then incarnation in Jesus Christ. Our Gospels are stories of journey too, and tonight we have the journey of the Magi, or Mystics, to visit the Christ child in Bethlehem. And over the course of this service, we too will make a journey with this Gospel reading, as we travel through the five sections of the liturgy, the Gathering together, hearing the Word, the Prayers and Confession, celebrating Holy Communion and finally the Sending out of God's people into the world. I thought it was discerning of Nathan to break our Gospel reading into 5 parts as they corresponded with the liturgy. Let's take a closer look.

Well as we gather today, to worship our God, our Gospel reading also tells of the gathering of the Mystics in search of the Christ child. And the theme of journey is kicked off smartly in the Words of Reflection at the beginning of our liturgy and again in the first two verses of our Gospel reading. The scene is set for Jesus' birth, its time and place, in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod. And in doing so, the Gospel writer introduces a contrast. A contrast between the earthly world of Judea and Herod, the puppet ruler installed by Rome over a conquered, fractious people, and the epiphany, or revelation found in the birth of Jesus Christ bringing in the Kingdom of God, an alternative world that resists imperial claims, that offers a different understanding of human existence centered on God manifested in Jesus, God with us.

And into this, come the Magi, the mystics, the wise men from the East, from far away, drawn to Jerusalem by a star, on a journey to find the child. They aren't Jewish, but they are drawn by hope and love, and the search for truth, to find this child. They are also the biggest cue at the beginning of Mathew's Gospel that this epiphany, this revelation, is not just for the Jewish people but for all people. And our readings tonight are remarkably consistent with this message. Isaiah from the Old Testament prophesies:

As the brightness of your light intensifies, nations and their rulers will be drawn to you like moths to a flame.

And Paul, writing to the Ephesians discerns:

The Gentiles are God's chosen people too. Those who have had no previous contact with God's people have exactly the same right of access to God as those who can trace their bloodline back to Abraham. There is only one body of people who will inherit all that God has promised, and Jesus Christ has opened that up to everybody, regardless of their origins.

Such good news for all of us. And news which puts fear into Herod as we find out next in our Gospel. A fearful earthly ruler who puts fear into the people he rules. How many earthly rulers like this do we have today? People ruling from a position of power, frightened of how their power may be eroded and inciting fear into others. This is in sharp contrast to the shepherd who looks after his sheep, the ruler who is "a shepherd to my people Israel", Jesus who preached about love, love of God and love of neighbour.

So, after meeting the mystics and consulting with his own priests, Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem, the obscure village that the prophets foretell will be the place of the Messiah's birth, asking the mystics to come back and let him know where this "King of the Jews" is. So the wise men leave Jerusalem and go to Bethlehem guided by the star, and find the child with his mother. And fittingly to match our liturgy of Holy Communion, they bring him gifts and worship him, overwhelmed with joy – they were over the moon! That they can see the worthiness of this child, is surely a gift from God, a gift of hope, love and joy - the same gift given to all of us through this child. And we like the wise men, in our liturgical journey, have also been given gifts of bread and wine, to be offered so that everyone may know that there is an alternative to the Herods of the world. We are all called to participate in this alternative world, this kingdom, signaled by Jesus' birth.

And then the Wise Men leave Bethlehem, but by a different route, taking the back roads out of Judea. They are charged to go home and avoid Herod, and to be witnesses to the joy that they have experienced, to be outposts in a perhaps unfriendly world. And after the joy of Holy Communion, we are also sent out to bring Christ into the world where ever we go.

How many of us will leave this place today and take a different route, a different journey? What is God challenging you to do when you go back to your patch? Will you be a witness to the joy and love, and the possibilities of the alternative world heralded by Jesus?

What a great set of readings we have had today! God is challenging us to deeply consider how we make our own Christian journey and how we give

witness to God's kingdom, manifested in Jesus Christ and grounded in love.

Let us pray:

Loving and Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have created this world of abundance and possibility. We give thanks for your love and grace upon us. We pray that as we listen to you, that we will understand how to be a generous people, sharing the abundance that you have given us. Help us to remember that we are loved and not to live in fear. Help us to bring your love with joy, and like the Magi, to go out into the world witnessing to your Word and sharing the light of Christ.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen.