

**Downing Place United Reformed Church
Sunday 5th January 2020 – Epiphany**

Sermon – The Revd. Dr. John P. Bradbury

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

I wonder where they did come from, these Magi from the East. If today you were to head East from Isarel-Palestine, you might pass through Syria. Blown apart by civil war, millions displaced from their homes, millions who have headed here to Europe seeking refuge, like Jesus and his parents ended up heading to Egypt. Then you'd pass through Iraq, whose recent history is known only too well through our news screens. A place which for decades has been the site of foreign forces of one sort or another. A place of internal civil war, brutal religious ideology, war with neighbouring countries, one of whom if one heads further east again is, Iran – so much in our news in the last few days as we hear of the American assassination of Suleimani, an act which threatens to destabilise the region and relations with the west in new way. Trekking on, one would come to Afghanistan – another place which has been unstable and subject to brutal religious regimes, external interference of varying varieties, and where things are anything but stable. Continuing East, one comes to Pakistan, the result of the partition of India along, essentially religious lines, which has led to tension and violence for decades.

If ever there was a corner of the world where it feels as if light is needed in the midst of darkness, it I in the lands to the East of Bethlehem – the least of the cities of Judah – in which Jesus was born, and these travelling Magi experienced joy. “They were overwhelmed with joy” we are told, as the star settles over the place where the Christ child is.

The lectionary does strange things to us at this time of year. Last week, we heard the passage immediately after this one, and were caused to reflect on the slaughter of the innocents, and the darkness that is experienced so often in the world. A story which shows the terror that brutal political leaders can exert. A story which fits all too well with the recent stories of the lands to the East of Israel. But in the midst of that darkness, these visitors are overwhelmed with joy as they encounter the Christ child. Yes, international politics will play its part into turning the Holy Family into refugees, just like the millions of refugees who are fleeing for their safety 2000 years later. But despite all of that, there is this moment of joy.

And yet it seems clear from the gifts that they bring that they are all too aware of. Gold for a king – for this one born in the unlikely backwater is indeed King – King of the universe. Frankincense for a priest, one who will intercede for the whole of humanity before God. Myrrh for one who would die an untimely death at the hands of the authorities and would need embalming before his time. These Magi were very aware that what occasioned their joy was not simple and easy. It was joy at a moment in the Jesus story that they had a clear inkling was not, in total, an easy story.

I confess that this sermon has been a difficult one to write. Last week I very deliberately and knowingly dwelt on the dark side of this story of the coming of the Magi. I dwelt on the character of Herod, and the reality that there are always Herod's in the world. With the clear sense that out of the darkness of that story, would arrive the light of Epiphany. This weeks sermon would be full of light and peace and hope. And yet, as the news from Iran ha reached us, and one ponders the implications for the stability of the middle east, and indeed, the world. And as we've watched the skies of Australia turn not bright with fire, but dark with fire, dark and brooding red. As we hear of the loss of half a billion of God's creatures, the loss of human lives, the loss of vital habitats, the loss of a section of the lungs of the planet, and we've witnessed politicians and the Murdoch media there blaming this on environmental activists and declaiming any link with climate change. Then yesterday I heard the news that a mediation group set up to find a way forward for the United Methodist Church, the American Methodist Church that is actually also a global Church, has come forward with the proposal that formal schism, splitting the Church into two or more entities is the only way now to deal with their differences over human sexuality. A decision that will likely split the Methodist Church in continental Europe East from West. As I've heard of all of this, I'm stuck in last week. I'm stuck with Herod and the weeping and wailing parents grieving their children. I want that experience of the joy of the magi at the bedside of the Christ child – and I have resolutely not experienced it this week. I am struggling to connect with Epiphany this year.

Which is perhaps all the more why we do need reminding of the themes of Epiphany. For those Magi did experience their moment of joy in the midst of the unfolding of the terror of Herod. God did, explicitly, invite into the midst of the Jesus story those who, just like us, don't belong. And that point is worth dwelling on for a moment. Because in it is embedded something of God's ways with the world and the way's we are called to live in the world.

In Jesus something very fundamentally shifts, from our human point of view and experience of history, at least. The Jewish people are called to be set apart, holy, demarcated from the rest of the world by their keeping of God's law. They are witnesses to the God of all creation, they exist for the blessing of all the nations, but are precisely set apart. To be Jewish is not to call non-Jews into Judaism. Judaism is not in anyway a proselytising religion. In Jesus, Christian theology understands that something new is happening. It does not negate in any way the status of the Jewish people as the people of God, but through Jesus we believe that the whole world is invited into God's story in a new way, a parallel way, perhaps, to that of the Jewish people. That regardless of one's nationality one is invited to become part of the extended family of the people of God through being baptised into Christ. In Christ there is no Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. These magi, these strange wise men from the East bearing their gifts prefigure that reality that St. Paul comes to frame in that way the other side of the Jesus story, after the death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And if we parse that phrase of St. Paul, we see that in the vision of God's ways with the world that Christ brings, nationality and nationalism play no part – nationalism breaks down at the point of baptism. We become primarily of Christ, not our nation. Our religious, cultural and social markers break down. Tribe does not matter, religious sect does not matter, social status does not matter, gender does not matter. Nation, race, tribe, sect, social status – these things are reframed, find their proper place, become secondary and entirely relativized by our being invited into the story of the Christ-child, born in that out of the way place Bethlehem. And if only that were truly so, if only that were genuinely realised as we hope and pray it will one day be in the Kingdom of God, if only those things were indeed no longer primary markers of human identity, to trek from Pakistan, through Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and through Israel and Palestine would be a very different sort of journey to that which it is today. How we must long for the full realisation of what those strange Magi witnessed to in the midst of the rule of Herod 2000 years ago.

And yet – even in the midst of the horror story of Herod unfolding, they did have their moment of being overwhelmed by joy. An encounter with Christ is indeed one which can bring joy and light into the midst of the darkness. And Epiphany is in part a call to us to make known the possibility of the joy, to make known the possibility of another way of being in the world, to make known the transformation that the gospel brings to individuals, communities, nations and the whole community of humanity across the globe.

And so, at the end of a week of difficult news, of darkness rather than light, we find ourselves invited to this table. The table around which, as we gather, and take bread and wine, we are promised Christ's presence with us. One of the things so deeply precious about Holy Communion is precisely that it does not matter what my frame of mind is, whether it has been a good week or a bad week, whether I come with joy in my heart or sorrow, what happens at this table does not depend upon me, or indeed you. What happens at this table is the work of God. The Holy Spirit makes Christ present in our midst, as we take bread and wine. As the Magi came to the manger, experienced the presence of Christ and were filled with joy, may we approach this table, experience the presence of Christ and be touched by joy this morning. May we, here and now, experience something of the light in the midst of the darkness, and be strengthened to take that light into our lives and the life of the world, and shine it in the dark places. Amen.