

Isaiah 60. 1-6

Psalm 72. 1-7, 10-14

The Acts of the Apostles: 10. 34-43

Matthew 3. 1-12

The parts for the annual nativity play were being allocated and Simon, who *had* played Joseph in the play for the last few years was billed as an inn-keeper; not the innkeeper, but one of a number of inn keepers whose doors Joseph and Mary would knock on and then be progressively turned away as the play unfolded, before they were able to find room in a stable for the night. Simon was a bit put out about what he considered to be this demotion; he had come to consider the part of Joseph was permanently his.

On the day of the play Simon was allocated the role of the first innkeeper whose door Mary and Joseph came to. As they came to his door and asked if he had room for them in his inn, in his peeved state he responded yes, yes, do come in, I have plenty of room. Thus, derailing the whole play. At this point it would have been nigh impossible to retrieve the nativity as we know it.

We have come to know the people who come from the east, seeking the one who has been born King of the Jews, in a number of ways – sometimes kings, sometimes wise men, sometimes astrologers; always men; always three. And we imagine the meaning of why they come, the meaning of their coming, as a result of this naming. Kings, astrologers, wise men. The Greek word for them is *magi* and maybe it's more helpful if we simply call them what they were – *magi*, rather than fit them into some classification of our own.

Magi were a caste of Persian priests with special claims to interpret dreams. Interesting given Joseph's vivid dreaming. In Matthew's very Jewish gospel, these gentiles appear as ones who track the stars with special insight into the meaning of their movement. This astrology, of which they were practitioners, would not be the hocus-pocus of the daily Herald-Sun generic predictions of what the day will hold for us; nor the monthly astrological forecasts in the New Idea. The *magi's'* vocation would have been part of a long tradition of people attending to the pattern in the movement of the stars and planets and resonances in the pattern of human affairs. It wasn't so much that the movement of the stars and planets determined human affairs, but that there was a reverberation between the two, to which they gave wise attention. They watched; and listened. As I mentioned on Christmas Eve, the coming of these wise ones is in some sense a fulfillment of the wisdom tradition through the Hebrew scriptures. It is an affirmation of a Jewish tradition which was about inclusivity, inclusion of all the nations, not about a bristling nationalistic exclusivity, looking for a political messiah.

As we found last week Herod was jealous and outraged by news of a rival king of the Jews. King of the Jews was *his* status – although in truth he was actually an imposter. But as we sang last week: *Herod then with fear was filled*. And so we are told he orders the massacre of all the boys around Bethlehem under two. This title, King of the Jews, is also the mock title nailed above Jesus' head at the crucifixion – an invitation to all who passed by to mocking and derision.

Going to the end of Matthew's Gospel, in his resurrection appearance Jesus tells the eleven to go and make disciples of the gentiles. It is as if he is saying: go and tell *them*. They will listen. My own

people have not. As John in his prologue says: *He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*

I feel we children of Empire were raised to read these words – *go and make disciples* - as some kind of colonising mantra; as the British empire has colonised the world, so the church should go and do likewise. The term “go and make disciples” in the last few words of Matthew’s gospel is a strange linguistic leap, though. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel the term disciple is always a noun; it always refers to the followers of Jesus. But in Jesus’ commission to the disciples at the end of the Gospel *disciple* is suddenly a verb – and translators render it as *make disciples*.

We children of Empire were part of the British imperial project of making the map of the world pink, at least protecting its pinkness:

Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet,

I don’t think we children of empire could help but read *make disciples* with a colonising mindset; a forceful kind of project. But I wonder if we render the verb *disciple* as just that: go and disciple the gentiles. It’s gentler, less forceful, more humble. And in this discipling, there’s a resonance between the merciful, invitational pattern of Jesus’ ministry and discipling in the same pattern.

One of the things we say about Epiphany is that we mark it, celebrating the revealing of the Christ to the Gentiles. The gentile magi come and recognise the Christ-child as the true king of the Jews. Something about the coming of God in this small child has been revealed to them. And unlike the crowds at the cross who mock and deride Jesus, they kneel and pay him homage.

We talk quite a lot about revelation in the church. We say our scriptures are the revealed word of God. We talk about knowledge of God being revealed to us; we seek for the will of God to be revealed for us. And we say that the whole of the gospel is a story about the nature of God being revealed through the life death and resurrection of Jesus. As we heard the writer of the letter to the Hebrews of Christmas Day: *He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.*

The theologian James Alison explores the nature of revelation in what I find is a helpful way – he talks about revelation as being something which happens outside of our control which leads us to a process of discovering things about ourselves and others that we didn’t know before. It’s not a process of rational thought or the work of our egos. The writer Paula D’Arcy describes it as: God comes us, disguised as our lives. This is not a process of *us* working it out. It’s not a process of someone telling us about it. It’s about something coming toward us which transforms our experience of the world.

What James Alison also says is that there is a flip side to revelation; a necessary flip side; that of discovery. Something cannot be revealed to us, unless we are in a state of mind and soul where we might be able to discover whatever it is that is coming toward us, that might lead to us being transformed, made more whole, healed in some way; being transformed by the renewal of our minds – as Paul says. Our egos are a pretty major impediment to us being able to discover. Our strong, robust, defended, very certain egos by which we try and control our worlds. And our egos

which are invested in our hurts, in our pathologies and our victimhood. We defend ourselves and our self-image with these things and the world of the spirit can't get very near.

Father Richard Rohr, in a series entitled *the Change that Changes Everything*, talks about the pattern of transformation. Of metanoia. Of revelation *and* discovery. He says that there are five big experiences that can change us in transformative ways: love, death, suffering, God, eternity. These are not the only things that can bring about transformation, but they are what Richard calls the five big ones. They are experiences which knock out our egos; lay us low, leaving us poor in spirit and vulnerable to the ravishing love of God.

It is always a challenge to lead the funeral of someone I haven't known; probably never met. This was the case with Dorothy Deason this week. Except Dorothy a number of years ago had written a five-page account of her life for a family history. It told the story of the trajectory of her life; but it also said a lot about her character and her faith.

Dorothy came to a deeply held personal faith in adulthood; it wasn't what you might call a public conversion experience, mediated by others. Rather, it was deeply personal at the same time as it galvanised her for life with a deep sense of the presence of God. Dorothy describes it in this way: "I found myself in what was to me a very frightening situation. All alone, I was beside myself, paralysed by fear. Through this incident I discovered that God as spirit was present in the world. If I was beside myself with fear beforehand, there aren't words to describe how I felt afterwards."

I think it is fair to say that there is something of the pattern of revelation and discovery in what Dorothy describes. She couldn't discover what she did without being laid low and made vulnerable to the ravishing love of God. You can't make people experience something like this. You can't argue them into this kind of experience. You can love them as they undergo such a time; you can accompany them. And it's better if you don't say: there, there, dear. It will be all right. Because maybe it just won't be. But God comes to us, disguised as our lives. And maybe there is a quest we must embark on to find the key to what has taken place for us. Curiosity and willingness to discover is needed for such a task. Grace is needful for such a quest.

The Gospel writers each in their own way use metaphors to hint at openness to the life of God; what is often called the kingdom of Heaven; the kingdom of God. Jesus talks about those who can see, and those who are blind. He makes reference to the those who can and who cannot hear. *Let those with ears hear*. John talks of it in this way: *to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God*. John especially works with the image of light and enlightenment. So it is one thing for God to come toward us and entirely another for us to be able to discover; receive.

What the coming of the magi, seeking the Christ-child, suggests is that here are some wise ones who are eager to receive. They have come on a quest across the wilderness to discover. The parallel for us in the coming of the magi is those circumstances which are for us like stars, which beckon us forward on a quest to discover; calling out of us a spirit of receptiveness.

The more I plumb the scriptures each week in worship preparation, the more I find the patterns of faith in its pages have resonances for us and our own faith journeys. Some time ago, maybe daft as I can be, I recognised the linguistic connection between the words question and quest. Seems obvious really. But usually we ask someone else a question – and hope, expect they will be

able to answer it for us. But I wonder about those deep existential questions; the painful questions; the niggling questions that won't go away that are our own questions; and nobody else's. Are we prepared to seek answers for them? Seek enlightenment. Go on a quest, seeking an answer.

The magi had a question: why has that star appeared? Shall we go, seeking an answer? And so across the wilderness they went. Sometimes, if we are courageous, if we are unwilling to settle for half answers or somebody else's solution, we have to traverse our own wildernesses, seeking our own answers. This is the pattern for us. So as we embark on a new year, as we leave the Christmas season, may we be unsettled enough to set out on our own quests knowing that the spirit will lead us into discovery and, like the magi, deep joy.

Andrew Boyle