

EPIPHANY HOMILY ESSENDON 2021
WELCOME TO ALL, ESPECIALLY THE OUTSIDERS
Mt 2.1-12 Is 60.1-6 Eph 3.2-6 (Rhyme Bible version also)

Another week gone and we're into 2021, with no bushfires this year, but ongoing anxiety about the pandemic and enduring presence of coronavirus creeping around the corners, with masks back on, just as we thought we were emerging from the nightmare.

Epiphany always takes me back to childhood and the excitement and anticipation induced in me by the extension of the Christmas season into the New Year every year, looking forward to the Magi arriving on the scene of the big crib, in front of the side altar in St James's Church in Gardenvale. My recollection is that the figures were life size, but I couldn't be sure, as perceptions as a child are quite different from our adult vision.

In our multicultural society, Epiphany is a very relevant and appropriate occasion to celebrate, that all are welcome at the crib, the manger where we are nourished by the presence of the One who gives us himself as the Bread of Life in Eucharist, which we can now gather to receive after 8 months of physical absence and deprivation here.

The portrayals of these characters provokes the imagination, and Christian tradition has converted them into 3 kings, although Matthew gives no number and just presents them as wise men. One suggestion is that the 3 represent the known ancient world of the time, as Persia, East Syria and Arabia, their names evolving into Caspar (not the friendly ghost), who became black, Balthasar and Melchior, later described as differing in ethnicity and age, from young to middle-aged to old, so everyone gets a go!

Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh represent the kingship, divinity and redemptive suffering of Jesus, so, in a sense, foretelling his future. Later, as the known world expanded, the thought was that they represented Persia, India and Mesopotamia, then continents Europe, Asia and Africa, off the map Australia of course missing out altogether!

Donald Senior CP describes how Matthew "*seems to view the Magi in a positive light, in the manner of the **righteous Gentiles**, who had the capacity to draw close to God through good deeds and reflection on nature.*"

And every year I have to produce my *Gifts of the Magi*, with booklet, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York New York, although I suspect the gold is Fool's Gold, and fake! The artists have portrayed it through the centuries, right up to Leunig. We'll have a look at two of his cartoons: "*There's no stable or manger on Google maps. I think we should call an Uber.*" And then he portrays what he calls A Christmas Miracle: "*Once upon a time there were three wise men... and three wise women. They met under a mysterious bright star. They talked, they laughed, they enjoyed each other's company. They appreciated each other., They inspired and humbled each other. They became friends for life. They found peace together. It as a miracle.*" It seems to me that they have had a ball imagining and interpreting the event in their own way. And then the story tellers and poets from O Henry (*The Gift of the Magi*), TS Eliot (*The Journey of the Magi*) to Dermot Dorgan (*The Fourth Wise Man who provided the nappy washing service; another version has fruitcake!*), took up the themes too.

And I like the bit where it is suggested that frankincense was good for bad breath, sore gums and even teeth (too late for mine), with antiseptic qualities! And of course, inert chemically, Gold is incorruptible, neither tarnishing or corroding, and invaluable.

(Just recently, we had a rare event we couldn't see, because of Melbourne weather, clouds obscuring the planetary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, at their closest point. One thought was that this could have been the 'star' sign followed by the wise men, although Halley's Comet or a supernova were other proposals, and in the end, it doesn't really matter.)

The term **Magi** connotes some connection with magic, astrology and astronomy. The ancients experienced much social chaos, and astral determinism was an unfortunate way of coping with life as it was, by just accepting fate and its consequences, feeling helpless about doing anything to change things. The Jerome

Biblical Commentary suggests that Matthew's story breaks the power of astral determinism, which raises questions today about why many people are still so fixated on astrology and their star signs, into which anything can be read, with wishful thinking and a crazy denial of proper science! Astronomy over astrology any day, I say. It was amusing and perplexing to me that there were a number of fortune telling businesses (as well as tattoo shops, which I could never work out why people would go for such self-torture!) around the tourist Mecca of Manly when I was there as parish priest, preaching against the nonsense!

The details are interesting, but not so important as the meaning of this strange event, following the dirty old shepherds surprisingly getting the message and arriving first on the scene. These shadowy, but friendly, generous and wise characters from the East symbolize the universal nature of God's revelation in Jesus, and Matthew gives them credit for recognizing the signs and responding to them by undertaking the long journey into the unknown, to acknowledge this child at his birth.

Of the Magi, Brendan Byrne SJ comments: "*We walk in the footsteps of the wise men. We share their wisdom, their longing, their faith and the joy of their discovery, and all nations of the world continue to bring their gifts to the Lord.*" Claude Mostowik adds: "*Epiphany calls us to wake up – to grow up and return home, as the Magi did, **by another way**, that was not the way of ethnocentrism, wealth, or co-operation with kings, priests and empire, but remember that God is for everyone and may we hold our doors open as wide as possible to all.*"

I'll conclude with a reflection I have used before at this time, as it reminds us of the need to continue to live the Christmas spirit of peace and good will, in spite of all the adversity and unpredictable around us, particularly at this present time in an uncertain and afflicted world.

It's titled ***The Bottom Line by Howard Thurman:***

"When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among others, To make music in the heart."

And so the positive message endures, with gift giving at Christmas pioneered by the wise men, who have left us with a lasting tradition of the spirit of generosity, wonder, good will and inclusion, embraced by the God of love and life, revealed for all in the person of Jesus.

A Happy New Year for 2021 and beyond to all.

john hannon

3rd January 2021