

ON BEING THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on 3 January 2021, being the celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany²

Our lectionary is one of the gifts of our regular liturgies. It requires us to consider texts that we might prefer to avoid. I greatly value that requirement when I am confronted by a difficult and, even, unpopular text. The lectionary controls preachers who might otherwise follow whatever course they prefer. Preacher controlled readings were my Methodist experience. I was fortunate in my first parish to have a minister in charge who used the BCP lectionary for the Eucharist and who had Eucharists frequently.

The downside of the lectionary is that it gives us our readings in bite-size chunks. To do otherwise would make the readings too long. But we often miss important pieces of the overall context. That is our problem this morning. Taken by itself, this morning's gospel is almost romantic. That's how it is represented in art and popular culture. But it's not how Matthew presents the story. It follows a long genealogy, which we never read in the lectionary. In truth, however, it alerts us to the sordidness of what follows. As Stanley Hauerwas has commented:

Matthew's genealogy ... is a stark indication that God's plan is not always accomplished through pious people, but through "passionate and thoroughly disreputable people."³

We have been warned. "Matthew's gospel is meant to train us ... to recognize that (the Father refuses) to save us according to the world's understanding of salvation, which ... depends on having more power than my enemies."⁴ The power play starts immediately.

The Magi arrived to find themselves starting a deadly political drama. We might think that they did so innocently, but I'm not sure that the story will let us believe that. If these were truly wise persons, they would have read the signs in the real world as well as the signs in the stars.

¹ Readings: Isaiah 40:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

² This sermon has been informed by:

(1) Kate Jones Calone, "When the wise men refused to collaborate with Empire", *Sojourners*, 6 January 2017, [When the Wise Men Refused to Collaborate With Empire | Sojourners](#)

(2) Rowan Williams, "Faith on the modern Areopagus" a lecture to the Pontifical University of Thomas Aquinas—Angelicum. The full lecture can be viewed here: [JP2 Lectures // Archbishop Rowan Williams: Faith on Modern Areopagus - YouTube](#). Summarised in John L Allen Jr, "Top theologian: Argument just keeps 'foot in the door' waiting for a saint", *Crux*, 18 December 2020 [Top theologian: Argument just keeps 'foot in the door' waiting for a saint \(cruxnow.com\)](#). A longer summary is here: [Angelicum | The Modern Areopagus. A lecture delivered by Abp. Rowan Williams](#)

(3) Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2006, Chapter 2,

(4) Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, London, SPCK, 2020.

(5) Robyn J Winter, "Christmas is political and always has been", *The Conversation*, 24 December 2020, [Christmas is political, and always has been \(theconversation.com\)](#)

(6) Kenneth E Bailey "A clear view of the Birth of Jesus" (Four lectures on YouTube, especially parts 3 and 4. The videos automatically follow on from: [1 of 4 - A Clear view of the Birth of Jesus by Kenneth Bailey - YouTube](#). Alternatively, Kenneth E Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Downers Grove, IVP, 2008.

³ Hauerwas, p. 33

⁴ Hauerwas, p. 27

Their first clue comes in their meeting with Herod. This is Herod the Great (73 BC-3 BC) who became governor of Galilee in 47 BC and was named King of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 BC. That is, Herod was a puppet king whose tenure could be removed at will by the Romans. That he did not immediately know where a new king had been born exposed him to ridicule. In the first place, that new king should have been his heir; of course, he should know. Second, his ignorance exposed his lack of knowledge about his own affairs. If there was a challenge from someone, his security and intelligence services should have told him. Do not imagine that he had no such services.

Herod then calls his compliant religious experts who tell him what the scriptures say. Having received that information, he sees the wise men in private, not wanting to let the news seep out. The Magi take his advice and end up, as our gospel tells us, adoring the Christ child and giving him their significant gifts. They are not altogether innocent and the penny drops that all is not well with Herod. So, they do not return to tell him what they have found and take another way home.

After today's reading ends, two other things happen. First, Mary and Joseph escape to Egypt. Second, Herod kills all the male children in Bethlehem under two years of age. We don't read about this horrific massacre in our ordinary lectionary for Sundays.⁵ Do not imagine that Herod was incapable of such an act. Josephus tells us that, just before his death, he ordered a round-up of thousands of notable citizens and confined them to a stadium in Jericho. His intention was to create widespread mourning at the time of his death by having those notables slaughtered. Fortunately, the order was not carried out.⁶

If you wanted a reminder of the vulnerability of God, this is the part of the story that you should attend to. This is Matthew telling us, right from the start, what the gospel entails. Here we see "the politics of murder". We, the church, are to be an alternative to those politics.⁷

Traditionally, we contrast the story of the Epiphany with the story of the Nativity. In the nativity story, the infant Jesus is revealed to the locals, shepherds who are, of course, Jewish. In the epiphany story, the infant is revealed to some gentiles. In this way, we complete the appearance of the universal saviour, not one confined to a particular group, but a saviour for everyone.

That contrast brings us to our contemporary problem. In the first place, we see the world very differently from our first century ancestors. As today's gospel tells us, there was then no distinction between religion and politics. They were both intertwined. Today, we know that religion is private and is to be kept separate from politics.⁸ Except that's not what the gospel says. Although, it's not the same everywhere. Try being Christian in North Korea or China. Alternatively, try the USA, where conservative evangelical religion has been co-opted by the forces of soon to be ex-President Trump. Try preaching in that context that salvation doesn't mean "having more power than my enemies".

In his helpful small book, *God and the Pandemic*, Tom Wright reminds us that God's kingdom, which is about restoring creation to the way it was meant to be, is achieved by God working

⁵ Matthew 2:13-18 is read at the Eucharist on 28 December, the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

⁶ Bailey, p. 57 Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, Book 1, Ch 33.6 [The Wars of the Jews by Flavius Josephus \(gutenberg.org\)](https://www.gutenberg.org)

⁷ Hauerwas, p. 41

⁸ See Whitaker

through loyal human beings. That is why we are “made in the image of God”. What God does; God does through us.⁹

In that case, we are the ones who have a major responsibility for the continuing work of revealing the Christ to the world. Last month, in an address, via Zoom, of course, to the Pontifical University of Thomas Aquinas in Rome, Rowan Williams spoke about the problem of establishing a basis for human rights and human dignity in a world of destructive competition. We can easily recognise the many cases where that dignity is denied. The almost insane competition for toilet paper during the pandemic is not, as we mostly assume, a joke. It is an outburst of such destructive competition as would satisfy and protect the self at the expense of others. More importantly, we could consider the Tamil family incarcerated on Christmas Island as a sacrifice to political competition for the strongest border policy.

Williams himself uses as an example the significantly successful attempt to eradicate Down Syndrome by the prenatal identification and abortion of affected fetuses.¹⁰ This process has not been overlooked by those who live with that syndrome and their loving families. For them, it is a sign that they are not of intrinsic value. Activity in the last century to eliminate the disabled shows a sorry story of the lack of respect for human dignity.

Williams notes that we cannot rely on human agreement to establish such inalienable right and dignity. The moral right of another is not within my giving or withholding or within the giving or withholding of any group, society or nation. This right and dignity, he argues, can be established only from outside the destructive competition of the world. That is, by God, who has no interest in any competition.

Yet this conclusion, he says, cannot be established by argument, only in lives, by persons. Which brings us back to the comments of Tom Wright, to our own responsibility not so much to preach or to argue as to live as though what we believe is true.

A sonnet on the Nativity by John Donne

*Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
Now leaves his welbelov'd imprisonment,
There he hath made himself to his intent
Weak enough, now into our world to come;
But Oh, for thee, for him, hath th'Inne no roome?
Yet lay him in this stall, and from the Orient,
Stars, and wisemen will travel to prevent
Th'effect of Herod's jealous general doom;
Seest thou, my Soul, with thy faith's eyes, how he
Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lie?
Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,
That would have need to be pitied by thee?
Kiss him, and with him into Egypt goe,
With his kind mother, who partakes thy woe.¹¹*

⁹ Wright, p. 33

¹⁰ [Prenatal Testing and the Future of Down Syndrome - The Atlantic](#)

¹¹ John Donne, “Nativity”, from *La Corona* [John Donne \(sonnets.org\)](#) In this cycle of seven sonnets, the last line of one verse is the first of the next. The last sonnet ends with the first line of the first sonnet. The circular nature of the series gives rise to its title.



The Adoration of the Magi (1890)
Tapestry
Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898)



Salterio de María de Navarra - El Sueño de los Tres Reyes Magos
The Psalter of Maria of Navarre (1340-1347)—The Dream of the Three Kings (1340)
Ferrer Bassa (c1285-1348)



The Massacre of the Innocents (1611-1612)
Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)



The Massacre of the Innocents (1945)
Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)