

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Epiphany Sunday

5 January 2020

“A Narrative for All?”

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14;
 Ephesians 3: 1-12 Matthew 2: 1-12.

The secular Christmas is long gone, replaced by the Boxing Day sales, the New Year fireworks and the cricket. Yet, as Father Glen reminded us last Sunday, there are twelve days of Christmas – the Christmas season only ends tomorrow on the 6th January. We have, nevertheless, decided to recount the last part of the story today.

The coming of the Magi to worship Jesus is the theme for the festival of Epiphany, and you can see that they have metaphorically arrived at the crib in the Chapel. Whereas, Luke's Gospel recounts the visitation of the poor shepherds, Matthew brings on the rich wise men. Each gospel writer had their own reasons for including or excluding anecdotes into the birth narrative. As historian Sir George Clarke wrote: 'all historical judgements involve persons and points of view'. And what was Matthew's point of view?

Jesus (and Matthew) the Teacher

Matthew's Gospel is known as the 'teacher's gospel' for it portrays Jesus, not only as the Messiah, but also as a new Moses who comes to reveal God's Law in all its fullness. To achieve this, the writer employs both the discourses of Jesus and narratives about what he did to present him as both rabbi and Saviour.

Interestingly, Matthew's Gospel breaks conveniently into five sections, which has caused many commentators to suggest that it is designed to be a new Pentateuch (or the first five books of the Bible). Jesus becomes the embodiment of the new law or Torah by fulfilling it in himself and calling others to follow him and do likewise. He describes this as becoming part of God's kingdom or 'rule'.

Fulfilment of the Law is about revealing its true purpose. This is a world-away from what we have come to call black-letter-law (or legal literalism); instead, the Matthean Jesus presents us with a contextual or spirit-of-the-law approach. This can be seen in how he replaces the ten commandments (written in negative 'thou shalt not' terms with the Beatitudes (expressed in positive 'Blessed are you' terms).

Matthew's scope for salvation is beyond that of the Jews (the chosen ones) to the whole world. It is a universal message, as reflected in the final passage of Matthew's Gospel in what we call the Great Commission to the disciples. Here the risen Jesus says, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'

Wise Men from the East

Matthew's Gospel ends with a focus on non-Jews (or Gentiles), but it also features them near the beginning of the Gospel with the arrival of the Magi (who were also Gentiles). We know the popularised version of the tale well; the astrologers arriving from the east to pay homage to Jesus, the new king. They followed a star to Bethlehem presumably from Mesopotamia in the east, where astrology was a developed craft.

They brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - heavy with symbolic meanings of kingship, divinity and death. This was a prophetic act by those who were considered 'outsiders' to Judaism. The visit of the Magi therefore affirmed Jesus kingly status, just as the genealogy of Jesus did at the beginning of the Gospel, but this time it is a recognition by the wider world – a new idea in its day.

This story resonates with today's readings from Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72, and is probably derived from them:

"...but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."
(Isaiah 60: 2b-3, 6b)

What is often overlooked in the story of the Magi is its context. It is difficult (if not impossible) for us to know the mind of Matthew and the people of his community, for whom the Gospel was written. We can, however, discern that the story of Gentile astrologers coming from Mesopotamia to pay homage to the Jewish Messiah would have sounded rather bizarre, at least until the purpose of the Gospel was finally revealed.

On the one hand, it was a theological statement, but on the other it may have been some sort of literary hook to gain the interest of the reader by suggesting that there is something new about to be revealed. Indeed, the first four chapters of the Gospel 'hooks you in' with accounts of extraordinary events, laying the foundations for what is to follow and encouraging the reader to continue further into the narrative. But there is more – what about the 'other' king?

A Story Within the Story

There is a story within the story of the Magi that captures the conscience of a king. Herod is a foil to Jesus. He was a King established by realpolitik – a leader who took control and ruled by power, fear and the exercise of violence. He was the type of Messiah that many of the Judean people wanted, except that he was a puppet to the Emperor. Jesus, on the other hand, came from a poor family without the resources of the state behind him. Yet, Matthew presented Herod as fearing this child born without power, status or wealth.

Of course, the clue is in the report of the chief priests and scribes who said that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. You see, Herod wasn't born a Jew, he was an Edomite who received his Kingdom from the Roman Senate because he was a friend of the Emperor. He was given the title 'King of the Jews' with the intention of mocking the Jewish people.

King Herod was afraid of rebellion and of any rival. The man who created fear in the hearts of others was at heart a fearful man himself. He therefore sought to entice the Magi into a conspiracy to have the child murdered, but they did not fall for it. The irony is that the foreign wise men could see and understand the presence of God in Jesus where the Judean insiders were blind to God's activity. Nevertheless, murder ensued but the child had escaped!

The Kingship of Jesus (based on love) is therefore to be held in contrast with the kings of this world who rule by fear, arrogance, and the abuse of power.

The Importance of Narrative

The story of the Magi, and more generally our reflections on the Gospel of Matthew, remind us of the importance of narratives as a means of creating meaning and bringing understanding. Of course, these understandings can change over time and the stories are adapted to new circumstances; but the dynamic of a story, leading to understanding, and finally leading to action remains.

The power of a corporate narrative is its capacity to bind people together for a common purpose. Wartime narratives (sometimes called propaganda) are often used as ways of alienating an enemy on the one hand and galvanising national action on the other. But they can be used for good or ill and eventually fade.

Sometimes narratives die. This is when they become disconnected from people's lives or no longer make sense in a changing world. For example, the political narratives of feudalism and the Holy Roman Empire gave way to the nation state, which in turn gave way to the democratic state as the world changed.

We should expect such changes to continue in the world of politics, but there is often something enduring about religious narratives because they speak of the human condition. Nevertheless, they still need to grow and change on the one hand, and on the other hand be protected from vested interests, such as sectarianism and tribalism lest they become self-serving and divisive rather than binding.

A Narrative for All?

In many ways, religious narratives are struggling in our pluralistic world. I am not suggesting that different religions should have the same narrative, as that would be a denial of the realities of history, morality, culture, and geography. What, however, could be helpful is a narrative that that can be inclusive of those outside a particular religious group. In other words, those who embrace a different story need not be understood as the ‘enemy’, or the ‘lost’, or the ‘infidel’, with all the negative connotations that these words bring.

Inclusivity is first found in the creation story. This narrative is not particularly culture-specific, for it concerns the whole world and not an explicit tribe, racial group, or religion – these things came later. The emphasis of the story is on God bringing things into existence, and that creation was meant to be good. Human rebelliousness, however, changed this and brought division, violence and pain.

The Matthean Gospel narrative also seeks to create an inclusive narrative, and the story of the visitation of the Magi is part of this. It draws us away from the preoccupation of the needs of a sect, tribe or nation and directs us to a more universal message of salvation revealed through Jesus.

The birth of a baby reminds us that life is a gift, for we can do nothing to create ourselves. Having been given life by our parents, we grow because we are nurtured by others - initially our families. We are also sustained by creation through the provision of food, water and the materials for shelter, mobility and communication. Human beings may fashion the things that are consumed; however, it is the earth that provides the resources to make them – we don’t create them out of nothing. Theologically, this is a matter of acknowledging God’s grace and providence and our responsibility as stewards of creation.

In the face of the current unprecedented drought and bushfires we need to recognise that the world is changing, and we have a responsibility to respond to it. The old national narratives of ‘she’ll be right’ and we ‘live in a land of plenty without any thought for the future’ are insular and unsustainable. We need to explore a more universal story where we understand ourselves as part of both a global humanity along with the natural world. In the light of this, it is vital to think and act in a way that is for the good of all people and not out of self-interest.