

beware Christmas!

a sermon preached at

the Epiphany

5 January 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *dr muriel porter, hon. parish reader*

the lections: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas can be a dangerous time. According to police, domestic violence increases at Christmas because of higher levels of alcohol consumption, financial pressures, issues about access to children, the tensions around visiting relatives, and even the ending of relationships at this time. If these pressures don't lead to actual violence and police calls, they often lead to unpleasant family rows.

And there is another dark side to Christmas too. For many who are estranged from loved ones, who are lonely or neglected by their families, or who have been recently bereaved, their ongoing grief and darkness is magnified at this time. I can never forget our miserable Christmas in the year my mother died when I was a child, despite the valiant attempts by our wider family to make it bearable for my sister and me. That sad Christmas focussed our terrible loss beyond the telling.

Christmas angst seems so ironic when this is supposed to be the season of peace and goodwill, of family harmony and happiness. Sentimental Christmas crib scenes where all is bliss and contentment can seem to mock the sad truth of many Christmases.

Yet as the Vicar has pointed out, the peaceful crib scene where shepherds worship the newborn child is just one part of the biblical account. Matthew's Gospel stories of our Lord's Nativity, where there is no manger, offer a very different perspective. Have you noticed the powerful thread of sombre reality pervading the Christmas readings from Matthew we are hearing this year?

It is certainly there in the account of the visit of the Magi that we celebrate on this Feast of the Epiphany. Before we delve deeper into this darkness, let us pause for a moment to look at these mysterious figures approaching the Christ child out of the East. Somehow they never seem quite as real as the humble shepherds of Luke's Gospel, do they?

Magi: astrologers or astronomers from Persia. Watching the heavens, interpreting the stars in relation to earthly events, was their profession. Not kings, as so many carols and paintings depict them, but nevertheless men of high status, of influence and great wealth in their homeland. Our word "magician" is related to the word "magi". No wonder they seem other-worldly. And the gifts they bring the Christ child! They are out of this world too. Matthew tells us they opened their treasure chests for him, no less, offering the kind of lavish, ceremonial gifts reserved for presentations to kings. Astounding visitors to a humble carpenter and his little family in their poor makeshift home in Bethlehem.

If we didn't know the rest of the story, we could think that all would now be well for Jesus and his parents. With the gift of gold alone, they would be set up for life, let alone with the gifts of expensive incense and the valuable anointing oil,

myrrh, as well. These gifts were of a kind beyond the wildest dreams of ordinary people.

Symbolically, the Magi have been seen as representing the Gentiles who will come to worship Jesus. So the Epiphany they embody is the manifestation to the wider world of ‘God among us’ in human form. Also a manifestation to the worldly and wealthy, as well as to the “poor and mean and lowly”.

But that doesn’t take us much further, does it? Perhaps it is why the Epiphany is something of a second-class feast in the Western Church. In the Eastern Church – the Orthodox Churches – the Feast is the main Christmas feast, focusing on more than the visit of the Magi and even the nativity. The focus is also on Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist – which we will celebrate next Sunday. For the Orthodox, the Feast of the Epiphany is more than the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles; it is the revelation, the shining forth, of Jesus as the Messiah, and as the second person of the Trinity, in all these events, and particularly in his baptism.

What kind of Epiphany does the visit of the Magi offer us? Let’s go back to the Gospel account. Yes, the wise men bring their rich gifts to the newborn baby, but they bring danger too, which ends in the worst kind of gratuitous suffering. Their news of the birth of a new king of the Jews is such a threat to the merciless, paranoid King Herod that the holy family has to flee into exile to protect the baby’s life. As we heard in last week’s Gospel, countless other infants are not so fortunate. They are slaughtered indiscriminately. The image of the agonising grief of their mothers – “Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be consoled, because they are no more” – is heart-breaking.

And for the Magi themselves the experience may well have been disconcerting, disruptive, as T.S. Eliot’s poem “Journey of the Magi” suggests. The poem ends:

Were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
we had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
but had thought they were different; this Birth was
hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.¹

Their journey to the Christ-child changed them. The Gospel tells us that they were “overwhelmed with joy”, a sure sign that they had experienced something beyond themselves, something far bigger than they were. This truly was an Epiphany for them. As the Franciscan priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr has said, “epiphanies leave us totally out of control, and they always demand that we change”.² When we truly experience them, they change us, so that we too go home by a different road. We too are “no longer at ease in the old dispensation”. Epiphanies bring us great joy – and great dislocation.

Fr Rohr speaks of “the final and most transformative epiphany” – that “life and death are two sides of the same reality, and they cannot be separated”. We cannot have one without the other, he says. “God is in both places – and at the same time!” We proclaim this “mystery of faith” at every Eucharist: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”.

¹ T.S. Eliot, ‘Journey of the Magi’, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber & Faber, 1974)

² Richard Rohr, ‘Epiphany: you can’t go home again’, *St Anthony Messenger*, January 2001.

Matthew's Gospel accounts of God coming among us as one of us, present this "mystery of faith" in graphic terms – there is the great joy of the birth and of God with Us, but also the stress and confusion that surrounds his mother's unexpected pregnancy; the overwhelming joy experienced by the Magi when they finally reach their destination, but also the danger they unwittingly brought for the newborn child, and for all those other babies and their mothers. And if T.S. Eliot was right, the dislocation to their own lives when they went home by another road, having experienced a birth that was also a death to their old lives.

As we come to worship the Christ child this morning, having seen his star in the east, may we too experience an epiphany that overwhelms us with joy, that enables us to hold that joy together with any pain and darkness in our lives, so that the mystery of faith – that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again – will transform our lives in ways that we cannot predict but that we can be sure will mean that God is (truly) With Us, the Word become flesh and living among us.

mporter@unimelb.edu.au