

the way of the magoi

a sermon preached on the feast of

The Epiphany

8 January 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,101-4; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Long before Luke's day of Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh,¹ Christ's birth was already the celebration of outsiders becoming insiders. The Christmas-card fancy-dress appearance at Bethlehem of exotic travellers from 'the east' almost masks the astounding revolution at work. Let us reflect on the nature of this revolution.

Last Sunday Muriel helped us to see more clearly the thread that runs from the ancient Israelite covenant, through the circumcision and naming of Christ; to our own baptism, to the waters of the font. Muriel reminded us that 'covenant' is a binding of relationship between two parties – in the case of ancient Israel, between God and the 'chosen people', an Ancient Near Eastern genetically-linguistically inter-related group. Covenant was maintained through faithfulness to the outer, visible sign of its establishment; namely, in the circumcision of all males.

Covenant as a concept creates insiders, and outsiders. There are the 'chosen' people; then there's the rest, the *goyim*. When this Hebrew word is translated into Greek it becomes $\epsilon\theta\nu\omega\nu$ *ethnōn*, and in English 'gentiles'. For there to be a covenantal people, there also had to be *goyim*, gentiles, outsiders. This ancient mechanism of the partitioning of humanity can still be observed everywhere.

The revolution in today's feast is this mechanism being blown wide open. The Epiphany celebrates the manifestation – the being made visible – of what the ancient prophet anticipated only for Jews, "I will pour out my spirit on *all* flesh"², but now for all people.³

The apostle Paul will in due course come to reflect theologically on the revolution: "In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed... that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus... to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God."⁴ Paul's claim is that the 'plan of God's mystery' is that the *whole of humankind* is to be understood as heirs, members of the same body.

This revolutionary proclamation means that the 'covenant' no longer excludes any person. There are no longer either outsiders or insiders.⁵ Persons considered to be outsiders turn out to be insiders.

The Greek word 'magoi' most likely means astrologers, which means these mysterious visitors would have been deeply despised by the purists of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, definitely unclean, impure, outsiders. But Matthew's account of their arduous and dangerous journey makes it clear that the categories 'insider' and 'outsider' have now been turned upside down: the supposed insiders possess information but without wisdom, and are aligned with the wrong power, with Herod;⁶ while these supposed unclean outsiders practising strange beliefs are found to be kneeling before the powerless Christ child.⁷ Of course, this reversal is precisely what we will see unfold again and again throughout Jesus' ministry.⁸

Now, from this very brief summary we might have thought that the matter was settled long ago; that as a consequence of the *evangelion* in Christ it would be impossible for the church to construct insiders and outsiders. No more 'chosen' people. The teachings of Jesus could hardly be more decisive, surely? And yet two thousand years of history painfully confronts us. We Christians have constructed ourselves as 'the elect', God's favoured insiders, consigning all others as damnable 'heathen' outsiders.

The tragedy is that we have repeatedly confused the superficiality of membership in a religious club, with the spiritual depth of being members of Christ's body.

Though the mechanism of our exclusion is different. Under the Israelite covenant 'insiders' were defined according to genetics and circumcision; they were simply to cut off the foreskin, remain faithful to the tribe into which they were born, and adhere to the very practical laws. Whereas the Christian covenant

¹ Acts 2

² Joel 2:28

³ Acts 2:1

⁴ Ephesians 3:5,6,9

⁵ Galatians 3:28

⁶ Matthew 2:4-5

⁷ Matthew 2:11

⁸ Matthew 19:30, 20:16, 23:13, 25:31-46

created ‘insiders’ according to the very slippery notion of ‘belief’. With us it was ‘non-believers’ who became outsiders, who we feel duty bound to ‘convert’, lest they burn in hell for ever.

Having said that, empire and Christendom created conditions that meant those who belonged to the institution were not necessarily primarily there because of belief. It may even be that the majority of Christians throughout the Christian centuries have not been particularly strong on ‘believing’; but rather more focussed on what nowadays is called ‘belonging’. If you wanted to get on in the world – to do business, and get the right education for your sons, and marry off your daughter to the right family, and so on – you simply had to *belong*. It is even possible that the majority of church-goers were simply enjoying the social and economic benefits of the power of belonging to a respectable club. When it was no longer necessary to belong, they simply moved on. We find this confronting and very painful, of course.

However, the mystery hidden for ages in God, which was not previously made known to humankind, but has now been revealed – that is, the Gentiles having become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus – has nothing to do with either the institutional concept of ‘belonging’, nor the rather rationalistic emphasis on ‘believing’.

Today’s feast’s radical proclamation – that God’s incarnating is for the gentiles – is grounded neither in ‘belonging’, nor ‘believing’. The Magi neither belonged to the ‘chosen people’; nor did they believe in certain propositions. They simply trusted the sign God gave them; were prepared to undergo a dangerous, arduous, and unknown journey into a foreign land, and accepted the suffering of losing their old certainties and having to return via ‘another way’.⁹ That wonderful T S Eliot poem so captures the essence of their suffering:

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.¹⁰

It is useful, as always, to reflect in the light of the Eucharist. Sharing in Christ’s body and blood does not depend either on belonging to a religious club, nor on believing in supposedly correct ideas. Consider Christ’s table hospitality – and his many parables and teachings. All that’s required is a willingness to trust the sign that God gives; to undergo the arduous, dangerous, and unknown journey to the Table of transformation; and an acceptance of the call to participate in the sufferings of Christ,¹¹ which means we can never go back to some old certainty.

Like the Magi, to ‘share in Christ’ is neither institutional belonging, nor self-righteous believing. Rather, it is a *spiritual path*, a way into the unknown, a way of en-lighten-ment,¹² into an unknown land, for the purpose of transformation.

The *evangellion*, the good news, is that the *whole of humankind* is invited into this spiritual undertaking, all are to ‘share in the same body’, regardless of any and every distinction we have ever invented.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

⁹ Matthew 2:12

¹⁰ T S Eliot, ‘The Journey of the Magi’, in **Collected Poems 1909-1962**, London: Faber & Faber, 1963, p110

¹¹ Philippians 1:29, 3:10; Colossians 1:24

¹² Luke 2:32