

# *enlightenment*

a sermon preached on the feast of the feast of the  
*Epiphany of our Lord*

3 January 2016

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7,10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Today's gospel story is *very* familiar to us. We know that only Matthew records this visitation of the Magi – that Mark, Luke and John apparently know nothing at all of this event.

We know that these exotic travellers from 'the east' - bearing precious gifts, adorned in colourful costume – brighten up 'Christmas'. Where would the children's Christmas pantomimes, the shop windows, and the Christmas card designs be without them!

We know that the naming of *three* gifts has erroneously fostered the popular idea that there were only three visitors – which is pure speculation. We know that, in spite of depictions in Christmas cards and carols, the travellers are neither 'kings' nor 'wise men' – most likely astrologers in fact<sup>1</sup> - in Greek, **Μαγοι** *Magoi* – a class of persons considered dangerous pagan outsiders by the religious puritans.

We know that Christian tradition has long reflected on the symbolic significance of their gifts: gold for the newborn 'king'; frankincense for Jesus the high priest; myrrh prefiguring Jesus' death, embalming, and burial.

We know that in these symbols our tradition has reflected deeply on their gifts as expressions of the spiritual life of all the baptised. Like the Magi, we also are to use knowledge and reason in order to find the Christ child. For they were scientists, making careful observations of the natural phenomena, and careful calculations based on their observations – and we too are to take the facts seriously. And as for them, the journey that leads to Christ can only be accomplished by risk – which is the gift of faith – offering to Christ the gold of our love, the incense of our prayer, and the myrrh of our willingness to bear the cross.

We also know that king Herod plays a central role in this story. However, it's revealing indeed that the Christmas cards and children's plays omit Herod's horrendous genocide, such is the schmaltzy infantilising of the Christmas story in our time. So let us take a closer look at this neglected part of the Christmas story.

"In the days of of king Herod..."<sup>2</sup> The scene is set in the first verse. These are *Herod's days*: this is *Herod's time*. This deceptively simple statement alerts us to the fact that the story is set against the backdrop of the ruling power: Herod. That the Magi choose to defy Herod is of course most significant – "having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod"<sup>3</sup> – their disobedience could cost them their lives.

The time of Herod is a very dark time: marked by jealousy, insecurity, rivalry, fear, domination, violence, slaughter. "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger."<sup>4</sup>

In a very different theological reflection, St John the Evangelist declared of 'the Word made flesh' that this "light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, as Matthew's chilling realism reminds us, only the foolish and naïve imagine that all is fairy lights. The time of Herod is very real. "The plan of the mystery hidden for ages, now revealed" is *not* welcomed by all, as the imprisoned apostle knew only too well.<sup>6</sup>

What does today's story – and this wonderful feast of the 'manifestation'<sup>7</sup> – have to say to us about *how to live* in the 'time of Herod'?

What immediately stands out is that the time of Herod cannot forever withstand the coming of the Light, the birth of the new humanity, the emergence of Love in the lowliest of places.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:2

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 2:1

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 2:12

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 2:16

<sup>5</sup> John 1:5

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:1

<sup>7</sup> **ἐπιφάναιω** *epiphanaïō*

And we notice that those who place their trust in the light – accepting the risk of the journey of faith – are given the gifts they need. The Magi are warned ‘in a dream’ not to return to Herod. Joseph is shown how to protect the newborn by ‘an angel of the Lord appearing in a dream’.<sup>8</sup>

Living in the time of Herod requires wisdom, hope, the peace and joy which the world cannot give, openness to the Lord’s signs - and patience. Patience, for the time when the darkness is finally exposed.

For darkness must be exposed, brought to Light,<sup>9</sup> be revealed by the light of consciousness. The unconscious masses are easy prey to the dark energies which rule in ‘the times of Herod’. “For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples.”<sup>10</sup> But, eventually, the darkness always over-reaches itself, and eventually exposes itself for what it truly is. Only then do the unconscious masses finally wake to the reality of the darkness.

The instances of this in history could fill libraries. The extermination of six million Jews by the ‘greatest Christian nation in Europe’ immediately comes to mind. Only when that darkness was fully exposed did the good Christians of Germany – and in fact Christians everywhere – wake up to the deep-seated systemic anti-Semitism that Christianity had harboured for 2000 years.

Closer to home, it was thrilling to read *The Age* editorial this week: “The Age believes strongly, and we will say this until the policy ends, that the strategy of turning back boats carrying asylum seekers is ignoble. It demonstrates a paucity of imagination. It has been ruthlessly executed, without proper regard for the asylum claims of those people intercepted. And it has brought this nation into disrepute around the world.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we are being woken up to our deep-seated xenophobia by the realization of how we look in the eyes of others?

I wonder how many of the newspaper’s readers would have realised the symbolic significance of publishing these words on 28 December? For on that day the church celebrates the feast of the Holy Innocents.

Astoundingly, on the very same day the Iranian President Dr Rouhani criticised Muslim countries for “being silent in the face of all the killing and bloodshed... Did we ever think that, instead of enemies,” he asked, “an albeit small group from within the Islamic world using the language of Islam, would present it as the religion of killing, violence, whips, extortion and injustice?”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps a sign of the Islamic world experiencing something of a painful wake-up to an aspect of its inner darkness?

The ultimately liberating and truly hopeful, evangel of today’s feast is that the light *will* be seen: “then you shall see and be radiant.”<sup>13</sup> Yes, the newborn development always prompts a regressive, aggressive, violent reaction from puritans and power-mongers. ‘Herod’ always seeks to kill the newborn: we see this throughout Christian history; we can see it even now in our own Anglican Communion. The Light is always threatening to the old dispensation.<sup>14</sup> And the masses are always unconscious to the trickery of smooth-talking, power-mongering Herods.

Nevertheless, on this feast we celebrate the **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion*. There are always faithful, courageous and patient seekers of the Light who, trusting the Divine messengers, trusting in Love, ‘returning to their own country by another way’<sup>15</sup> are given what they need in order to protect the newborn development, waiting for the right time and directed to the right place.<sup>16</sup>

And all of us are called to be those faithful seekers: offering the gold of our love; the incense of our prayer; and the myrrh of our willingness to bear the cross.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 2:13

<sup>9</sup> John 1:9

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 60:2

<sup>11</sup> “It is time for Australia to set the refugees free”, Editorial, *The Age*, 28 December 2015, <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/it-is-time-for-australia-to-set-the-refugees-free-20151227-glvfjx.html>

<sup>12</sup> “Iranian President Hassan Rouhani speaks up, says it’s up to Muslims to correct Islam’s image”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 December 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/iranian-president-hassan-rouhani-speaks-up-says-its-up-to-muslims-to-correct-islams-image-20151227-glvmy4.html>

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 60:5

<sup>14</sup> John 1:11

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 2:12

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 2:19-23