

Following the light of Christ

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 6 January 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Dawn Robson

Epiphany C

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 12: 1-12

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

You already know that the narrative of Jesus’ birth is found only in Matthew and Luke’s gospel.

But, did you know that Luke only deals with the shepherds and makes no mention of wise men? And Matthew only with the wise men, and makes no mention of shepherds? Of course you do!

These stories are quite different and each expresses the theology of the gospel in which it is found. The shepherds in Luke fit in with Luke’s emphasis on the poor and marginalised, while the coming of the Magi represents Matthew’s concern with the extension of the Gospel to all the nations of the world. This fits in with the agenda of the Risen Christ at the conclusion of Matthew, where Jesus says to his disciples *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations And I am with you always to the close of the age.”*

Geoffrey Plant in his book “Welcoming the Outsider” points out that both the shepherds and the wise men were “outsiders”. Shepherds were despised by the religious leaders at Jesus time. The nature of their job meant that they remained in the fields with their flocks day and night. They were unable to observe the full practices of the Jewish law, such as in washing and food preparation. Nor were they free to travel to the temple in Jerusalem for the great religious festivals. They were considered ritually and literally unclean.

The wise men were also outsiders. They did not belong in the Holy Land: they were not Jews. They came from *“the east”*, possibly Persia, now modern-day Iran. About 500 BC the Hebrew people were overtaken by the newly-expanding Persian Empire and they lived under Persian domination for many years.

So, many Jews would not think favourably about people who came from Persia. Some scholars suggest that the wise men were Zoroastrians. They were Magi, a sect of astrologer-priests, who thought you could tell the future by studying the stars.

So the wise men were from a different country, a different race and a different religion. Yet Matthew introduces them as having something to teach us about our God.

Now, you may know the Persians were considered to be an enlightened people. They believed in order; they introduced a law code under Cyrus the Great.

Matthew introduces the wise men into the birth narrative to show that Jesus was welcomed and worshipped by representatives from other nations, not only the lowly, but also by the intelligentsia.

This visit of the wise men to the Christ child is called *The Epiphany*. Epiphany happens when light is shone upon something that has been dark, when something hidden is revealed. God comes to the world in Jesus and finally the world gets to find out what God is really like. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

By the wise men paying homage to the new infant king, God's light was being revealed beyond Israel to the whole world. God's light continued to shine through Jesus throughout his earthly life and still shines in our world today.

It was pointed out to me this week that while we in the West focus almost exclusively in Epiphany 1 on the Magi, traditionally Epiphany was the celebration of three miracles: the coming of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus and the wedding at Cana, which are all described as events in which the identity and glory of Jesus are shown forth.

So today in Epiphany 1 we celebrate the Magi being led by the star to the infant Jesus, next week our focus will be on Jesus changing water into wine at the marriage feast, and the following Sunday our thoughts will be on Christ's baptism by John in the river Jordan.

Now let's look at Herod. The Romans appointed Herod to be King of the Jews in 40BC. He was known as Herod the Great, but he had a fatal flaw. He was insanely suspicious and eliminated anyone he thought was a threat, including three of his own sons. Naturally he was keen to get rid of this child Jesus, who could have been a rival leader. Fortunately the wise men realised Herod's real interest in the baby Jesus, and refused to co-operate with him and pass on to him Jesus' whereabouts.

The story teller (Matthew) wants us to understand that the story of Jesus was not going to be thwarted by a tin-pot dictator. The story has to travel far and wide with the Magi, who were travellers. Today the story has to travel with us.

Both the shepherds and the wise men actively sought to find Jesus. Both groups followed a dream, or maybe some kind of inner urging until they were brought to the infant Jesus and his parents.

The wise men took a risk. They embarked on a journey into the unknown, not knowing where it might lead or what they might find. They have a lesson to teach us. If we truly seek to find Jesus in our world today, we must take the same risk and step out into the unknown.

You ask: *how and where do we look for Jesus today?*

When John the Baptist heard in prison (chapter 11) about the deeds of Jesus, John sent word by his disciples saying "*Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" Jesus answered them: "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them.*"

I think that wherever these things are happening in our world today – that is where we will find Jesus. You are all familiar with the Inasmuch passage: in as much as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

So for me this passage today is firstly about finding Jesus, but it is also about gifts to give him. What gifts do we offer to the Christ today? In the Presbyterian church of my childhood we sometimes sang the hymn "In the bleak mid-winter". Any ex Presbyterians remember that hymn? Ah, a few hands are up! So do I. It is not in our current hymn book, but the last verse has stayed with me through the years: *"What shall I bring him, poor as I am, if I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb, if I were a wise man I would do my part, but what can I bring him? – bring my heart"*

I was recently blown away by the TV documentary "Don't Stop the Music". A few heads nodding. OK that's good. We sat glued to each of the three episodes. For those of you who missed it, it's worth checking it out on ABC IView. It's the story of disadvantaged children at a primary school in Armadale, an outer suburb of Perth.

Many of the children had learning difficulties, and their attendance levels were poor. The principal believed that music could assist these children. She found some folk to help her make this dream come true.

Now Guy Sebastian (who you probably all know about) visited the school on a number of occasions. He sang to the children, he spent some time individually with some of them, and inspired them all to want to sing and play musical instruments.

The Salvation Army donated some brass instruments so that a band could be formed, and one of their members became the band teacher. The children were all excited about singing in a choir, and learning to play a brass instrument or violin. They practised hard and after only seven months of tuition, they performed at the Perth Concert Hall.

It was plain to see how the introduction of music into their school life lifted their spirits, opened their souls, improved their grades, and made school a place they wanted to go to each day.

Now Guy Sebastian would not consider himself to be a saint, but his actions were saintly. He offered his gifts to children in need, and surely Jesus was present in that action. God's light shone upon that school community.

We too are called to be seekers of love's incarnation.

The spiritual journey is an active one in which we follow our instincts and the signs that point to the possibility of God's presence among us. This story of the three wise men/travellers tells us that God's love is to be found in surprising, yet common, places. We don't have to look far to be of service. The need is all around us.

Let us respond to it.