

Sunday 3 January, 2021

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Emeritus Chris Carolane, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Epiphany of our Lord.

Readings [Isaiah 60:1-6](#); [Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14](#); [Ephesians 3:1-12](#); [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

I remember the first time that I went to Cambodia to work amongst the poor. Back in 2005 the situation in Phnom Penh was dire. It was only seven years since Pol Pot had finally died, but there was still a lot of terror in the community and there were a lot of unaccompanied children living in the slums and on the streets around the river waterfront.

Our team went out with World Vision, who back then were still involved with “hands on” work amongst the poor in Cambodia. We joined them to do some night ministry with street kids. Not long after we arrived there were over 100 urchins who had heard that we were there and had arrived for the evening’s activities. World Vision set up a “pop-up” medical clinic to treat the kids’ minor ailments, we organised games with the children and taught them songs. At the beginning of the night, some of the World Vision team counted the kids that had turned up to ensure that we had enough food parcels to give every child one each at the end of the evening.

When the evening came to its end, the children were all told to sit down in two long lines to be given a food parcel. Only children who were sitting would be given one, so very quickly they sat down. Our team had the joy of going along the line and giving each child their gift of food – bread, fruit and a drink. One child – one parcel. The children were so grateful as most of them only got their food from begging or scrounging off the street. As soon as they got their food, after thanking us politely, they left us for the night. The terrible thing was, that more children had arrived after the headcount had been made. Even though the team had allowed some extra packs to cover such a contingency, as the food was handed out, as we got to the last children in the lines, it became evident that we were one pack short. Every child had food – except one! A little boy of

about seven or eight missed out. He began screaming and sobbing uncontrollably – with tears rolling down his cheeks. Every child had received a gift – except him. How unfair! What had he done to deserve such treatment? We tried to console him, but he wouldn't be consoled. Of course, we didn't leave him with nothing. A couple of team members quickly went to some street sellers and bought some food to give him and eventually, when he realised that he wasn't going to be left out, his tears finally abated. This was an important lesson for me to learn. If you are going to give gifts to a poor community – make sure you have one for everyone. The message you give if you only give to some is terrible.

Next Wednesday, 6 January, as it does every Jan 6, the church celebrates the Feast of the Epiphany – the first day after the twelve days of Christmas. This is the day that we rejoice in the truth that when God gave the gift of his only son to come into the world to bring light and life, that the gift was NOT only for some, but was for the WHOLE WORLD. No one was left out from the gift.

The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek ἐπιφάνεια (epipháneia) meaning “manifestation” or “appearance”. On this day, we remember the coming of the Magi to visit Jesus and most importantly that when he was revealed to them, they bowed down and worshipped him.

Over the past 2000 years the account of the coming of the Magi searching for the newborn King of the Jews, has been accommodated into the birth narrative of Jesus told by Luke in his gospel. I'm not sure why, but there is a lot about this event that has come to be accepted but actually isn't true.

Firstly, despite our carols that sing to the contrary, the visitors were Magi, not Kings. In the first century, the term Magi was used for a Persian priestly caste, but later was used widely for magicians and astrologers, so I guess they might have been wise men, but the Bible doesn't call them that – it uses the term Magi, it certainly doesn't call them kings.

Secondly, we don't really know how many there were. The Bible says they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh as gifts, and so we have come to assume one person per gift and assume there were three of them – but there could have been any number of them in their party.

Thirdly, they did NOT visit the baby Jesus on Christmas night nor the next night, nor the next nor the next. Despite what we might sing about in our carols or see in nativity scenes, the Magi did not visit the manger at all, nor were they there with the shepherds.

Fourthly, Jesus was probably somewhere between one and two years old when the Magi finally found him. By then Mary, Joseph and Jesus were living in a house in Bethlehem if you look carefully at our gospel reading today. King Herod, on hearing about a “newborn king of the Jews” from the Magi, was so viciously jealous of any child who might claim the Jewish throne and so usurp his position as king, tried to get rid of Jesus by killing all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old or younger (but not until after Mary and Joseph had escaped to Egypt with Jesus). This is how we know Jesus was not a newborn when the Magi arrived on the scene and we can estimate his possible age.

Interesting as all these things may be, actually the most important thing about the coming of Magi is the one thing most people miss. The key thing about the Magi is that they were not Jewish. They were gentiles. It is this fact that is really the most important thing about them coming to worship Jesus.

Throughout its history, the Jewish nation had seen itself as God’s chosen people – and so they are. Unfortunately, this had led them to wrongly believe that God was only interested in them. They believed that God’s gifts and grace were only for them and they had come to believe that the rest of the world – the gentiles – had been left out as recipients of God’s grace and goodness. They looked forward to a Messiah, but despite what the prophets had been saying over thousands of years, they believed the Messiah was only for them and would not be for gentiles as well. If this were true, then you and I and all who are not Jewish could rightly wail as the little Cambodian boy did when he thought he would not receive his gift of food.

You might recall that way back when God gave his promise to Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish faith, God had said that through Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed. Perhaps this is why right at the start of his gospel account, Matthew goes to great pains to list the genealogy of Jesus, showing that not only was he a descendant of King David from whose line

the Messiah would come, but he was a descendant of Abraham to whom the promise of blessing for all the nations of the world had been given, so many years before.

Our Old Testament reading this morning from Isaiah 60 proclaimed

Arise, shine; for your light has come,

and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth,

and thick darkness the peoples;

but the LORD will arise upon you,

and his glory will appear over you.

3 Nations (the Hebrew word is “gentiles”) shall come to your light,

and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

and our Psalm this morning reminded us:

11 May all kings fall down before him,

all nations (again the Hebrew is “gentiles”) give him service.

Psa. 72:12 For he delivers the needy when they call,

the poor and those who have no helper.

In the coming of the Magi to visit and worship Jesus, we see these prophecies fulfilled. Here, right at the start of Jesus’ life, we see the recognition that Jesus came as a light for all people. His gift of light, life and salvation was not only for the House of Israel, but it was also for the whole world.

The Magi were the first gentiles to worship him, but they certainly were not the last. Most commentators observe that when Matthew wrote his gospel account, he had a Jewish audience in mind. Throughout the gospel he makes many references to the Old Testament and to prophecies concerning Jesus. It is significant therefore that it is Matthew alone who records the coming of these gentile Magi to worship the Messiah. It is also Matthew who records the words

of the gentile centurion, who after observing Jesus death at the foot of the cross proclaimed “Truly this man was God’s son!” In so doing, he was arguably the first gentile to acknowledge who Jesus really was. And it is significant too, that it is Matthew who records for us the great commission from Jesus to his disciples, just before his ascension into heaven:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)