

Sunday 2nd January

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

The Power of Love

The reading from Matthew's gospel today tells the story of the Magi who came to Jesus. Bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Wise men, following a star, bringing gifts. Journeying on so that they could see the newly born Jesus - the King of the Jews. You know the story. We three Kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar and so on. (even though in all likelihood they were not kings, there probably weren't three of them and we don't know exactly where they came from).

They go to King Herod's palace in Jerusalem. Where else would you go to find a king? But Herod knows nothing of a new king. He asks his own wise men – his chief priests and scribes – and they tell him that according to the ancient scriptures, the new King would be born in Bethlehem. So he puts the Magi right and sends them on their way. But come back, he says, when you've found this king and tell me so that I can go and worship him too.

So the Magi head off to Bethlehem and find Jesus there. They bow down and worship him, presenting him with their gifts. Then, having been warned in a dream about Herod's evil intentions, they head off home by another route.

But why is this strange tale of wise men and gifts and a star and a journey included. What purpose did Matthew have of telling this story?

Ah well, you would say, the story is included so that we know that Jesus didn't just come for Jews, he came for everyone. The fact that these foreigners travelled across the desert bringing gifts so they could worship Jesus tells us that. And, you might add, it links in with what we call the great commission at the end of the gospel where Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. A neat Matthew sandwich with nations coming to worship Jesus in the beginning and disciples going out to preach the message of Jesus to all nations at the end. A fitting start and finish to the most Jewish of gospels.

The story then is included because it is about revealing Jesus to the world as the King – not just of Israel, but of the world.

That's why we call this festival Epiphany – it's a moment of sudden and great revelation. Jesus revealed to the whole world as the one who will save everyone.

But maybe the story tells us more. More about about the nature of kingship, of power and authority. More about how Jesus would exercise his rule and authority. More about our use of power.

Herod (and this Herod goes by the modest name of Herod the Great) had been made king some 30 years or so earlier by the emperor Augustus because of his family's loyalty to Rome. In many ways his rule was a success, or at least outwardly. Expansion of his dominion, massive building projects including the rebuilding of the Temple. But he was always looking over his shoulder. His reign was not secure.

After all, he was not from a royal line. He had no real claim to the kingship. He was not a descendant of David, nor of the Maccabees who led a rebellion some 150 years earlier and set themselves up as kings. He was not even Jewish by birth – he was of Arab ancestry – even though he was a practising Jew.

He married a descendant of the Maccabean kings – Mariamne – to give himself some credibility but it made him no more popular and he felt no more secure. He was ruthless in his treatment of those who were a threat to his authority – in time he murdered not only his son but also his wife and most of her family in case they challenged his power. He certainly was a ruler with a love of power and an obsessive desire to protect that power.

So its not surprising that his jealousy was aroused when the Magi came calling on him with their tidings of a new born king. Its not surprising that he tried to get them to come back and let him know where this new king was – it doesn't take much imagining to think of his evil intent. And its not surprising when we read in the verses just after the gospel that he arranged for all likely children in Bethlehem to be killed. His love of power was so great.

Perhaps we see echoes of Herod's insecurities in leaders across the world today. Leaders who will do anything to hang on to power. Leaders for whom

power is like an addictive drug. Leaders for whom the retention and exercise of power is the only motivation. Leaders for whom the common good means nothing.

And when we see so many leaders like that – and it has always been so – we can see quite clearly why Jesus as he grew up and began his ministry was not recognised for who he was. The Jews were looking for a king – a messiah – and this Jesus did not match up to their expectations. Their only experience of kingship was in people like Herod. Most of the kings they knew about from the nation's history were like that. What they were looking for was a Herod type figure who would release them from Roman shackles. Perhaps someone who in many ways resembled Herod, but who was not tied to Rome as he was.

Jesus' kingship was totally different from that of Herod. His rule as we know was based on love, not fear. His concern was for the ordinary person, the outcast, the sick, the poor, the lost and the lonely. His tools in his fight were love, compassion and self-less giving. He demonstrated the power of love – diametrically opposite to Herod's love of power.

As the Christmas season morphs into Epiphany, it is fitting to remember that the baby born in Bethlehem grew into the great teacher who demonstrated the divine authority given to him by showing love to all. Yes, Epiphany is about the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles, but surely its also about revealing just what sort of king he was to become. A king who by word and deed and example demonstrated the power of love. A king who wants us to join with him and say it doesn't have to be the way it is. A king who reveals that there is another way – the way of love.