

Homily – 03-01-21 Epiphany - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: **Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-15**

On this first Sunday after Christmas the lectionary gives us the opportunity to choose from three themes, and each of these has a schedule of Bible readings to support it. We could focus on the visit of the wise men, with their expensive and highly symbolic gifts. Or, instead remember the children in Bethlehem that Herod ordered killed when the wise men did not return to Jerusalem. Or, we could focus on the way that Joseph was warned in a dream about Herod's rage and so fled to Egypt with his family.

Which of these themes to focus upon on this first Sunday of a new year? I have been particularly drawn to the visit of the wise men, which is remembered in the Western Church as the Feast of the Epiphany. Part of the reason is that on New Year's Eve I met two friends in Bunnings who came to Toowoomba three years ago from war torn Syria. They have both played basketball with my son, are working in two cities, and one is renovating his house during the holiday – hence the trip to Bunnings!

It is easy to forget that before the years of conflict in Syria about 10% of Syria's population was Christian. My friends in Bunnings have family members in Damascus who celebrated Christmas one week ago in churches that have been vandalised and bombed, and who live with fear of violence each day because of their Christian faith.

The Christmas Gospel last week proclaimed that a census was ordered by Emperor Augustus two thousand years ago, and that it was taken when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. A familiar image on Christmas cards is Joseph and Mary travelling to Bethlehem in response to that census. However, I think it's important to remember that the country of Syria and the town of Bethlehem are now deeply troubled places.

This weekend, the reading from Matthew's Gospel tells us that wise men *'from the East came to Jerusalem'* looking for the *'child who had been born king of the Jews'*. I'm guessing that they were wealthy, and had connections, because Herod did not have them imprisoned or tortured, and he did not hand them over to the Roman administration. Instead, he feigned a desire to honour this new king, and he entreated these foreigners to come back and tell him who the baby was, and where he lived.

The Christmas cards and carols suggest that there were three wise men riding camels – and that they were kings! However, three kings travelling without any guards or servants seems a very unlikely thing for those days, or our own time... and the suggestion takes us some way from the original text of the story.

For Matthew's Gospel states that an unspecified number of *magoi* – a Greek word usually translated as wise men – arrived in Jerusalem from the East. So, there may have been three wise men, or seven, or nine... we don't know. But the text tells us they were wise men, not kings. If we look at a world map we could assume that they had come from what we now call Iraq or Iran. Important to remember that these people were not Jewish, and through their study of astronomy, and the prophetic wisdom of their culture, they believed that something significant had taken place – and that someone significant had been born.

This insight had caused them to leave the comfort and security of their homes and country and go on a long pilgrimage. A pilgrimage that would culminate in them being generous to a family that would soon have to leave the country of their birth in fear of their lives. Considering the experiences of refugees escaping persecution in our own time I think it is reasonable to imagine that the gifts given helped sustain Joseph, Mary, and Jesus during their years of exile in Egypt.

Remembering the visit of these wise men on this first Sunday of the year invites many questions to help helpfully think about and they include:

- How willing are we to invest time in study, as those wise men did?
- How willing are we to follow a sense of divine leading to go on pilgrimage, as those wise men did, even if this means leaving where we felt comfortable?
- And, how open are we to being generous enough towards another person, that their life might be sustained, or even saved, because of that generosity?

In some ways these are relatively easy questions although there is the potential for significant challenge particularly when it comes to pilgrimage and generosity. But the questions are directed at us and are intended to assist personal journeys of faith. I think there is also the potential for more uncomfortable questions when we remember the visit of those wise men from long ago and they concern the lives of those who have tried to come to Australia as refugees.

Eighteen months ago the Australian Government turned the Kangaroo Point Central Hotel in Brisbane into an Alternative Place of Detention, or Apod. This is to contain those refugees and asylum seekers, previously held on Manus or Nauru, who needed to come to Australia for medical treatment. There are more than one hundred men who have been held in that place now for at least a year. Many of these people come from Iran like those wise men from long ago. A mixture of Christian and Muslim whose lives are in limbo. A mixture of Christian and Muslim whose only crime was to escape persecution in the countries of their birth.

- What does our faith say about their situation?
- And, what is the way forward for them in the unfolding gift of 2021?

Friends, let's pray...

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love, and your call to follow each day. We ask for your blessing on all who live in our world as refugees and asylum seekers, in the same way that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus lived for a time so long ago. We pray in the name of the one who said, 'I was stranger, and you welcomed me...' Jesus, the Christ. Amen