

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 1st January 2023 – The Epiphany

Readings: **Isaiah 60:1-6**
Ephesians 3:1-12

Psalms 72:1-7;10-14
Matthew 2:1-22

If you get to church at some stage this morning – congratulations! For, with New Year's Eve celebrations last night there may have been the temptation to sleep in. However, it's been so good to have Christmas Day last week, and New Year's Day this week, on a Sunday because on each day there has been an opportunity to come together collectively and be thankful. Thankful for the birth of Christ last week, and for the gift of a New Year today.

In the Gospel reading last week we remembered some shepherds encountering angels while they were at work on the hills outside the town of Bethlehem. While in this week's Gospel we remember wise men, guided by a star, coming from the east. The images on Christmas cards can be misleading because they often have three kings, on camels, coming to see the baby in a stable.

In the Armenian tradition these three kings are named as Balthasar of Arabia, Melchior of Persia, and Gaspar of India. However, Matthew's Gospel does not say that there were three kings, but rather an unspecified number of wise men. For the Greek word, 'magi', is translated 'wise men' not 'kings' and they brought their gifts to Joseph, Mary, and Jesus after they had left the stable and were staying in a house.

If we thought that remembering the visit of the shepherds was subversive because they were so ordinary – then the visit of the magi is much more so, because they were not Jewish and were foreigners! However, the Gospel writer tells us they were considered wise and came from cultures and religions found in countries to the east of Israel.

On contemporary maps if we went east from Israel this would include Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. If we then went further east, we'd find ourselves in what we call Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. So, there is something rich in the Armenian naming of the magi which has Balthasar from Arabia, Melchior from Persia, and Gaspar from India.

The Gospel tells us that these wise men had, from their studies of astronomy, the sense that Jewish prophecy would be fulfilled, and an anointed king would be born for the Jews. Not surprisingly the magi went to Jerusalem and asked king Herod if he could tell them where they might find this promised king. Herod discussed their request with the chief priests and top religious thinkers who affirmed that if it was to be anywhere it would be in

Bethlehem. Herod told the travellers this and asked them if they were successful in finding the new king to share his identity with him on their way home. So, the magi went to Bethlehem, and they found Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. They gave gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before returning to their home countries. I love the refrain of that old Epiphany hymn, *'Oh – star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading still proceeding, guide us to they perfect light...'*

However, then the story takes us into territory not pictured on Christmas cards. Joseph was warned in a dream that if he did not leave the country of his birth, his child would be killed. So, he took Mary and Jesus to Egypt, and they lived there as refugees for some years.

There are some challenging questions that come from this. The first is to ask ourselves how open we are to recognising the potential gift that is present in people who come from cultures and religions very different to our own? On our streets today, in our shops, schools and places of work, we meet people who have come from 'the east' like the magi of the Gospel. Some have come as migrants to Australia from India and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. While others have come as refugees because, like Joseph, their lives and the lives of their children were at risk in the countries of their birth. These include people from South Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

Last Friday I had the great joy of marrying two people from the South Sudanese community who live in Ipswich. Like any wedding it was a great opportunity for families to come together and pray for God's blessing on the relationship that was being formalised. However, unlike many weddings it was an opportunity for family members to come together who not seen each other for many years because they had been scattered across the world by three civil wars (Sudan: 1955-1972; 1983 – 2005; South Sudan: 2013 – 2020).

Today's Gospel ends with the reminder that corrupt power can destroy those who are innocent. For, King Herod was enraged that the wise men did not return to him with the identity and location of the promised 'king'. To eliminate the threat, he therefore ordered all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. Horrific as this is to remember in our time, it is very small scale compared with the atrocities we all watched unfold last year in Ukrainian towns and cities... like Bucha, Mariupol, and Kyiv. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is ongoing and in our globalised economy the impact on food, energy, and technology prices will continue to be significant. Hopefully – and as people of faith I think we always have reason to hope – the coming year will bring an end to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Thinking of 2023, I wonder if you have made any New Year resolutions? Some of these can focus on our health, like... less screen-time and more exercise! While others can focus on reprioritising our relationship with God and with other people. Into the mix of possibilities, and in the light of this weekend's Gospel, can I invite you to consider three things:

- The first is for each of us to try and read beyond the news headlines, particularly when it comes to people groups effected by migration and refugee policy. Perhaps, find out more about those countries to the 'the east' of Bethlehem described in the Gospel. I think particularly of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan because we have significant diaspora communities from these countries in Toowoomba... and our community is greatly enriched by these.

In addition I am conscious that there are a growing number of communities and congregations in our Diocese that are enriched by the participation and presence of seasonal workers from Pacific nations. People who have come from Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Samoa. People who have come to Australia from the east!

What is the capital of their country? What is the political and economic situation of their country? What languages do they speak? What foods do they eat? What do they hope for in 2023, and, what do they miss most?

- The second possible resolution is that when we see people who have come from another country – at the very least, say 'G'day!' and smile. And, as they come to our churches, work-places, and schools... we offer them our name and ask them theirs. I think there is a God given opportunity in such exchanges for our lives, and theirs, to be enriched by mutual friendship... Further, for us to play our part in building a more civil society and making real the Australian value of 'Fair go!'
- The third is for us to pray intelligently for peace. To pray for countries and leaders by name, and to pray for Christian churches in many of those countries, particularly in their witness and work for peace.

In the journey of this year may we each be blessed to meet and share life with wise people; may we have the courage to be generous, and recognise the presence of God's Spirit each day.

I'd like to close with an adapted prayer from the book of Numbers (Numbers 6:24-26):

“May the Lord bless us and keep us; the Lord make his face to shine upon us, and be gracious to us; the Lord lift up his countenance upon us, and give us peace. Amen”