



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy New Year. I mean really: happy new year.

By all accounts, most of us are happy to leave 2020 in the rear view mirror. I felt, as we were celebrating with our family the other night, that we weren't so much welcoming in the New Year as dispensing with the old!

This has been an incredibly challenging year from almost every perspective: spiritually, socially, physically, politically, and economically both here in Canada and globally. There has been it is fair to say, seismic change in our world as COVID-19 has ravaged our society and forced so many shifts. And there is a feeling in the air, a taste in the mouth, that's difficult to articulate but it goes something like this: "Thanks be to God that year is over!"

I think it's not too much to say that we'd collectively like a restart. There is a pervasive feeling that the events of 2020 must not continue. Prayers for a fresh start, even more prayers for a successful rollout of a vaccine and a general re-orientation toward an active future seem a good way to begin this year.

These thoughts were still tugging at the corners of my mind as I revisited the scriptures in preparation for today – the translated feast of the Epiphany. Good thing too because that's exactly what's on offer in the scriptures in this season. The original word for this feast was Greek – "epiphaneia" and it means disclosure, manifestation, or unveiling. And that's really apt for, at its heart, this is a biblical narrative about seeing things differently; of recognizing the alternative reality that is God's kingdom: a reality that shines with the brightness of a star against a backdrop of political intrigue, double-dealing, and the fearful defense of worldly power. It's a narrative about the power - and danger - of seeing differently – of seeking God's kingdom in a world of principalities and powers.

Epiphany is also a word that's familiar to us from literature. It was James Joyce – author of *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* or *The Dubliners* -

who famously referred to an Epiphany – as the sudden realization or comprehension of the larger essence or meaning of something. He meant that it was sort of like finding the last, crucial and completing piece of the puzzle so that you can now see the whole picture.

We start with the wise men – magi – astronomers, Persians probably. These men from the east – that’s a narrative signal that they were therefore foreigners and gentiles - outsiders – were men who were attuned to reading and interpreting the heavens, men who expected to experience divine action in human and earthly affairs, and were used to seeing the world differently. They are cast in high relief against Herod – a man who made his own fortunes – who expected to control the outcomes of all his actions. A man who would not welcome the intervention of any power that rivaled his own.

So the magi, although men, were intentionally set apart from the ways of men to look to the ways of God; to wait for the epiphaneia and the theophaneia; the revelation or showing of God’s self, in human space and time.

At the simplest level then, on the feast of the Epiphany we remember the appearance of the magi from the east in the last installment of the story of Jesus’ birth. But today is much more than a commemoration. If we think about these events - these last pieces of the puzzle in the story of the incarnation – that compels us to reflect on the whole picture and ask: what are the ramifications of the child Jesus? What difference does His birth manifest or unveil?

Will this child really usher in a new reign and rule in which, according to his mother Mary, God will put down the mighty from their seats and send the rich away empty-handed?

Answering those questions requires that we all think about things a little differently, it requires a restart, a fresh take. It requires that we, like the magi, attune ourselves to understanding God’s ways, not ours.

And the clue to the answers to those questions lies in something really fundamental to this narrative: to the identity of those wise men themselves. Because even while Matthew focuses on Jesus as King of the Jews and the fulfillment of Israel's history, in another divine turn in the scripture narrative, the magi themselves are a particularly poignant reminder that Jesus has come for all peoples from all places.

The magi who traveled long and hard to worship Jesus with extravagant gifts, the magi who were foreigners and gentiles, remind us that He is not only the King of the Jews; in addition because God’s love is always expansive and not exclusive - he's the King of all nations and all peoples.

This idea takes its origin in St. Paul. That is profoundly original and risky thinking on his part. Again, there is this emphasis on the power of thinking differently – it runs all through his letters. His ministry, he writes, is “for the

sake of the Gentiles,” – for us - but for long ages past this has been a “mystery”. In Jesus this mystery has now been revealed, “that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus”. This is from St. Paul, the one who bore both the joys and the scars of thinking differently about his own ministry.

The magi, then, "unveil" this mystery from the first and “disclose” the nature of God's kingdom announced in Jesus. And so a singular truth for us is that while others are busy building walls, in Christ, because of this account and because of Paul, we know that our parishes are to be the houses of prayer for all people. The magi symbolize the divine promise given to Abraham for "all peoples on earth" in Genesis and John's vision of heaven with people from "every nation, tribe, people, and language" in Revelation – the same vision that angels told to shepherds on a hillside announcing the Messiah's birth – peace on earth and goodwill to all people.

And this is only the beginning. This different kind of king – Jesus - abolishes not only the barriers of nation, race and ethnicity. He also transcends the boundaries of gender, religion, economics, and social strata, for in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are one in Christ Jesus”.

It is all this that the Magi find in Bethlehem – all this that they unveil and disclose. In this sense, the magi are the last piece of the puzzle – an epiphany in themselves. They show us the power of seeing differently, of being attuned to the things of God.

But there's something else here too. The magi came to worship Jesus. On seeing Jesus and Mary, “they bowed down and worshipped Him,” offering him gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Herod tells his confidants that he too wants to worship Jesus, but that's a lie. Here is the danger of seeing things differently, because it's not easy to swim against the tide – it's not easy to live for God's justice and truth in an unjust and post-truth society.

Matthew says that when king Herod heard the news of another king he responded in fear, paranoia, and eventually infanticide. I think it's fair to say that Herod also experienced an Epiphany - his bid for power, his construction of this world was challenged by God's ways and he knew it.

It's fascinating that Herod makes the leap from the King of the Jews that the wise men are looking for, to the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Of course, we forget that Herod himself was Jewish. And we also forget that he had been granted the title “The King of the Jews” by Rome and that he ruled in Judea only at the pleasure of Rome.

And because Herod was steeped in the same Jewish scriptures as the people he ruled, I suppose it makes sense that the only King that he truly feared was the Messiah foretold who would deliver his people.

In this, perhaps it is the one time that Herod did think differently – understood that a different and more powerful story to the one he was living was being written.

For Herod had not delivered his people. Instead he had sold out to the occupying Roman forces. What he heard from the scribes and chief priests frightened him in a very worldly way: he knew himself to be convicted by his people and he feared them.

I suppose that lesson in the sovereignty of God is one that is writ large in the account of the Incarnation. Over and again we have heard for weeks now that when God enters the picture that all our best laid plans somehow shift over to accommodate his plan for our lives. From the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah to Mary's pregnancy and her yes and manifesto to Joseph's dreams to Herod's fear and the Magi's arrival, we can see very clearly that God's ways are not our ways. And I suspect that this part of the narrative of the nativity rings very true with many of us here today. For as we know by now, this is a keynote of the life of faith – a sure indicator that we are looking to the things of God if our lives work out in unpredictably wonderful ways.

The biblical scholar, Walter Brueggeman says, “It is amazing – and the true accent of Epiphany – that the wise men, . . . rather than hesitate or resist, with great courage they reorganized their great wealth and their great learning, [and] reorient[ed] themselves and their impressive lives around this Little One who is uncredentialed but who becomes God's way of newness in the world.” (Brueggeman – “Off by nine miles”)

You see, that's the trick. Too often we would settle for this world's definition of power and kingship, but God bids us to set our sights on something much greater, something much more profound and radical; to see differently, to live differently. We are called to live not with the worldview “My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.” (Deut. 8:17) But with the one that says, “for all things come of you Lord, and of your own have we given you.” (1 Chronicles 29:14)

God bids us have faith in the life-giving kingship of the one who came in vulnerability to shepherd his people – still a king – still powerful, but utterly different to this world's understanding of power: a king who stood willfully and willingly here among us and for us.

This is the life to which we have all been called – all who follow the way of Jesus Christ. We've been called to attune ourselves to the things of God. To think differently, to act differently, and to live differently and to hold up the possibility of a different world - the kingdom of God.

May God bless us with the courage to do these things, and may 2021 be a year of difference.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.