

St Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops, BC: 10 am – December 9, 2018
Epiphany Sunday / Homilist: Rev. Michael Shapcott

As Augustine taught us, let us pray:

Look upon us, O Lord,
and let all the darkness of our souls
vanish before the beams of thy brightness.
Fill us with holy love,
and open to us the treasures of thy wisdom.

Amen.

I was delighted to hear Dean Ken offer an apology for the scandalous fact that a Christmas tree is still adorning this beautiful cathedral. As all of you must know, a very learned group of theologians and church leaders gathered at Tours in the year 567 and settled the dates of Christmastide. Of course, one must never underestimate the capacity of theologians and church leaders to continue to argue about such things as the proper dates of Christmas a millennium and a half later.

In the theologically correct dating, Christmas ends on January 5th, which this year was last night, Saturday night. It has long been the practice on the Twelfth night, as the last night of Christmas is called, to turn the world upside down, or perhaps it is better to say downside up. There used to be a practice to bake a pea and a bean into a cake. The man who got the bean in his slice would become king for the day, and the woman who got the bean would be queen.

The great William Shakespeare's play Twelfth Night celebrates a similarly topsy-turvy world in which Viola, a woman, dresses as a man; and Malvolio, a servant, assumes the guise of a nobleman.

All of which is a very appropriate way to herald Epiphany – which is today, the day after Christmas – and a time when a new world is revealed that is completely different from the existing world.

Today is Epiphany Sunday – epiphany is a Middle English word that comes from the Greek word *epiphainein*, which can be translated back into English as 'reveal'. This morning we celebrate the Epiphany – the manifestation of Jesus the infant to those who are wise. One of my Bibles – the one given to me on my ordination as a deacon – has this title over the story in Matthew we have just heard: "The Visit of the Wise Men".

I began my homily at the 8 am service with this skill-testing question: How many wise people are there in the 12 verses of Matthew we read today? Of course, there are the magi. How many? The text doesn't say, but the tradition has been that there were three wise men.

There are others in the Matthew story... what about the chief priests and scribes of the people, also not numbered in the text. They were clearly learned people who knew their Scripture, in particular Micah and Samuel, about the importance of Bethlehem as the birthplace of a great and mighty ruler. They provided Herod and the magi with the valuable information that helped the magi to get to the place where Jesus was born. Were they wise?

Or what about the powerful King Herod. He was politically astute enough to serve as a significant ruler within the Roman Empire. Not mentioned in the Matthew text, but looming over the birth of Jesus, was Caesar Augustus – firmly in control in Rome for more than four decades as the God-king of the Empire, or as he demanded to be called: *Imperator Caesar divi filius*, "Commander Caesar son of the deified one". Were Herod and Augustus wise men?

The brilliant Herbert O'Driscoll, in a short commentary on Matthew chapter 2, says this: "To be truly wise is to search for what is coming to birth in an age of death, to search for what is beginning anew in an age when much seems to be ending."

May I just pause to say that Herb is well-known and well-loved to many of you. He is a long-time friend of the Sorrento Centre. We are delighted to be welcoming him back to our campus this summer. Please check the Sorrento Centre website for specific details.

To recap: Herb tells us that "to be truly wise is to search for what is coming to birth in an age of death, to search for what is beginning anew in an age when much seems to be ending."

The Roman Empire at the birth of Jesus was an age of death. The status quo was powerfully real and absolute. For the handful of people – the magi, Mary and Joseph, a few others – who saw the birth of a homeless and helpless baby as the beginning of a new age, well, that hardly seems like wisdom. It seems more like wishful thinking at best, or more likely destructive folly.

Yet the wisdom of a new world, a world founded on love and justice and an abundance of peace, as we read in today's Psalm, rattled at least some of those powerful people. Here's more from Herb O'Driscoll, who writes that to search for what is coming to birth:

"...perturbs people. It perturbed Herod and indeed the whole of Jerusalem. Why? – because people become easily inured to death. They regard as normal many attitudes which are abnormal and spiritually malignant. It was normal in that long-ago world to see life as brutal and oppressive, to feel that history was static and imprisoned, just as it is normal to see our age as the prisoner of dark giants that stalk our consciousness and fill us with despair..."

"New birth in human affairs is so disturbing because it is so unexpected. It upsets prearranged patterns. It refuses to conform. It is never born in our predictable Jerusalems or Caesareas where power and creativity are supposed to be in charge of production. Instead it sneaks into our world in the Bethlehems, in the backwaters, in human situations and in human minds where we presume that nothing can grow..."

The story of magi (astrologers or soothsayers or sorcerers) with their strange gifts seems so geographically remote, so culturally and historically distant, that it may be reduced to a quaint fairy tale to us gathered here at St Paul's Cathedral in Kamloops on this Epiphany Sunday in early 2019. Primitive times, primitive people, primitive practices. An interesting read, perhaps, but little more in these modern times driven by smart phones and artificial intelligence.

But the story of a new empire, an empire founded in the birth of a baby, an empire of love and justice that challenges the most powerful empire of its day – that empire based on domination and death – that story is as relevant today as it was for the wise magi so long ago.

Okay, I want to stop here and say that I know that it is easy to sound foolish, perhaps even cruel, in speaking of a kingdom of love born with a baby in obscure Bethlehem a couple of thousand years ago when we are facing out into a world of unbelievable and almost unimaginable cruelty and suffering.

For almost four decades, I have worked as a housing and homelessness advocate, and I have attended way too many funerals of people who have died on the streets of Canada, one of the richest countries in the world, because our governments lack the basic moral integrity to fund a comprehensive national housing strategy.

I know that tens of millions of people around the world are victims of humanitarian disasters prompted by war as well as political, economic, social and environmental distress. I know that some of those people, including young children, have been brutally tear-gassed and have died at the hands of the government of the United States – which bears tragically close resemblance to the worst excesses of the Roman Empire of Jesus's time.

I know that the raising up of financial markets and profit-seeking as the dominant cult of our times has generated inequality, inequity, poverty, hunger, illness and premature death.

The magi were wise enough to see what Herb O'Driscoll calls "birth in an age of death" and "beginning anew in an age when much seems to be ending". This beginning anew is what Paul, in the passage that we heard from Ephesians, calls the "mystery of Christ". But please don't think that "mystery" means something that is illusive, or ill-defined, or that has no impact in the real world when we are facing the reality of the anthropocene, or vicious US border practices, or harsh and immoral globalized markets. In Colossians, Paul tells us: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

The Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, in his Christmas sermon of 2018, said this:

"God, in the greatest of sounds, the Word of God, the baby at Bethlehem, calls to the world through a baby's cry: "This is who I am. This is my way of being. This is my language, love." That word of God has become flesh - tangible, visible, intimate - flesh that changes the world, changes every person who hears and responds... God's love, expressed in the word of Jesus, is not a language of sentiment and cheap comfort but a language fit for the reality of a harsh

world of oppression, of cruelty, of injustice and suffering. It has a vocabulary for passion, for anger, for protest at injustice and lament. It is the language of the whole of scripture. It is the language lived by Jesus, and it starts in the manger.”

“When great events stir us, or gathering shadows in nation or world wake us in the dark hours, we bring light when we turn to God made flesh and speak the language of God’s love... In this child Jesus, God comes among us physically. God’s language of love is a body language: being present as a human amid the joys and terrors of human existence... God’s language of love is exclusive. It requires us to forget other languages of hatred, tribalism, rivalry, political advantage and of materialism, pride, greed, and so many more...”

It takes deep and sustaining wisdom to know and embrace love in a world of hatred, and to see the possibility of a new world in the misery and suffering of the present world.

But it is exactly that wisdom that shines through in the words of Psalmist that we read earlier today: The Psalmist calls for righteousness and justice, for prosperity for the people and to “rescue the poor and crush the oppressor”. The Psalmist knows that the empire of love will bring an “abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more” and that the poor and the oppressed shall be lifted up. Redemption, in this kingdom of love, is not a spiritual exercise, but a practical cleansing “from oppression and violence”.

May we, like those magi so many years ago, have the wisdom to follow the shining path of love and justice, not the imperial path of death and destruction.

I will close with excerpts from a re-telling of Psalm 72 by Nan C. Merrill:

“Bring justice to the peoples, O Beloved,
And your mercy to all generations!
May people be known for mercy, rendering justice to the poor!
Let their spirits soar as an eagle, let joy abide in every heart!”

“May every heart open to your Love from sea to sea,
From the River of Life out to the universe!
May fears that paralyze the people rise up from the depths into Your Light!
May the leaders of nations from all the earth listen to Love’s Voice...”

To which I can only say:

Amen.