

St Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops, BC: 8 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.

Good morning! 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". And in the very first verse we read that "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem".

In the original Greek, "wise men" is the word "magos". The go-to lexicographer for Biblical Greek – Strong – tells us that "magos" is an "Oriental scientist; by implication, a magician: — sorcerer, wise man". There is a further depth of meaning: "the name given by the Babylonians (Chaldeans), Medes, Persians, and others, to the wise men, teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreters of dreams, augers, soothsayers, sorcerers".

So, here's a 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 because there are three gifts offered, the tradition has been that there were three wise men. Matthew tells us that there were wise men from the East – and this is an obvious reference to the prophetic words in Psalm 72 about kings paying tribute to a mighty new ruler. Our short passage ends with a note that the magi were "warned in a dream not to return to Herod", so they took a different route home. They were clearly skilled at the interpretation of dreams – very wise indeed.

Are there any other wise people in today's Gospel reading? Who got the magi on the road to Bethlehem? It was the chief priests and scribes of the people – a collection of learned people (we don't know how many) who knew their Scripture, in particular Micah and Samuel, about the importance of Bethlehem as the birthplace of a great and mighty ruler.

The chief priests and scribes were smart and knowledgeable and had 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. He was smart enough to take action when he heard people talking about the birth of a powerful new ruler. Herod knew who to talk to – the chief priests and scribes, the most learned people of his land. He obtained information about Bethlehem. He was canny enough to make it all hush-hush – Matthew tells us Herod “secretly” drew the magi into his confidence. It is very clever to win a person’s confidence by pretending that they are extra special people. The tactical thinking for Herod didn’t end there – he assured the magi that he too wanted to pay homage to the king, so they should tell him everything they learned. Herod was canny, astute and smart, prudent and also devilishly tactical.

Does that make Herod a wise man too?

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. Augustus Caesar was firmly on the throne as a God-king. He took the title *Imperator Caesar divi filius*, “Commander Caesar son of the deified one”. He presided over an empire of death and destruction – and his regional henchmen, such as Herod, appropriated the imperial glory to boost their own petty regimes.

Augustus Caesar was obviously very smart – he had to be not only to survive but to dominate Roman imperial politics for more than four decades. Herod, in his own way, was astute and canny. The chief scribes and legal experts – they were clearly learned.

So, how many truly wise people are there in today’s dozen verses from Matthew. The answer is that the only truly wise people were those who recognized in the birth of a helpless baby to refugee parents who couldn’t even find a decent place to stay that a new era was dawning.

Towards the end of his life, when Jesus was facing another petty despotic official of the Roman Empire – Pontius Pilate – Jesus said that “my kingdom is not from here”. Jesus was not just another ruthless politician like Herod who managed to claw his way to the top.

No wonder Herod was afraid when he heard the stories of a baby God-king. No wonder the chief priests and scribes, who knew their prophecy, but who clustered for power around the fringes of the Roman Empire, didn’t comprehend the very words of Scripture that they had learned so well. All these very smart and accomplished people were not really all that wise.

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” or what Jesus himself said what his kingdom, which didn’t resemble any earthly kingdom.

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.”

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.

May we, like those magi so many years ago, follow the shining path of love and wisdom, not the earthly 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.