

Sermon 3 January 2016

Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12 'The light dawned...?'

Prayer: Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable... Amen.

We are in the church season of 'Epiphany', the celebration of the arrival the revelation of the 'Light of God' to earth. To have an "Epiphany" is to experience a revelation; to see something – perhaps in a new light, perhaps to see something for the first time – something that has been staring you in the face since forever... When you have been *struggling to understand* and **suddenly** you "do". We have an old English saying 'The light dawned' and with this saying, today we hear the echo of 'light revealing...= epiphany.

In the church calendar this Season always includes the story only found in Matthew's Gospel of the arrival of the Magi to the Holy Family; the arrival of 'light'. Jesus – the Light of the World, as John calls Him in his Gospel. The light theme is firmly fixed with the passage from Isaiah because of the close association with the Magi from the East... But Matthew, Walter Brueggemann says: ^{1*} "Matthew is not the first one to imagine three rich wise guys from the East coming to Jerusalem." We just heard from Isaiah about Jerusalem becoming the – THE trade centre of the East with goods and money and people pouring in – because the Glory of God's light was shining on / in His people.

The ^{1*} Isaiah passage is a poem recited to the Jews in Jerusalem about 580 B.C.E. They had been in exile in Iraq for a couple of generations and had finally come home - back to the 'bombed-out' city of Jerusalem. But they were in despair; who would want to live in a city where the towers and guarding walls are torn down; the economy failing, leadership is weak and nobody knows what to do about it? Cv

Into the middle of the mess, an amazing poet, Isaiah invites his *depressed, discouraged* contemporaries to **look up**, to hope and to expect everything to change. "**Rise, shine, for your light has come.**" He anticipates that Jerusalem will become a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a new centre of international trade. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . ." Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from Asia and bring prosperity. This is cause for celebration. God has promised to make the city work effectively in peace, and a promise from God is very sure. The glory of God will shine and ^{2*} "be completed in the glorification of His people. **Their radiance is essential** to any bright future of God's own imagining." cV

The *interesting thing here* is that just like Matthew, the wise men know about Isaiah 60. They know they are to go to Jerusalem **and** to take rare spices, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Most important, they know that they will find the **new king** of all peace and prosperity.

But we already know that when Herod (the then 'king' in Jerusalem) heard these plans, he was 'frightened'. Any 'new' king is a threat to the existing king and the established order, let alone one 'born to be King'. Herod knew all about threats to 'his' kingship, and *so did Jerusalem*. Death was the result of any threat perceived by Herod. **Someone** was going to die – Jerusalem knew it!

Herod however, continued to 'gather information' **diligently(!)** Brueggemann says he would have consulted with the leading scholars, and asked: "Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is all this business about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh?" The scholars tell him: **you have the wrong text**, you missed it. And the wise men outside your window are using the wrong text. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the centre of the global economy. It's not about Kings and kingdoms or is it???

Herod presumably did not like that verdict asking: "Do you have a better text?" The scholars are afraid of the angry king, but tell him, with much frightened trembling, that the right text is Micah 5:2-4: But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old . . .

^{1*} W Brueggemann Off By Nine Miles; ^{2*}BBTaylor Home by another way'; ^{3*}Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

Herod then told the Eastern Magi the truth, and the rest is history. Bethlehem is 14km south of Jerusalem. The wise men with their long intellectual history of learning and a long-term practice of mastery had missed their goal by 14Km! **But they still had the 'light'**, the glory of God shining and so they continued onwards – when the 'star stopped' they knew they had arrived. They offered their gifts – and worshipped.

Then they listened – or then the **light dawned** and they did not return to Herod, **choosing** to go home by another way. We don't know how many Magi there were, a document from St Bede of Ireland names 3 and so the tradition continues with their relics, discovered by St Helena are now shared between Cologne and Milan Cathedrals... CV

This reflection is called '*the light dawned*' – because at many point in 'today's story' understanding happens for many people... and at that point they made choices. The one thing they could not do was turn back the clock of their understanding because the light, the light of God had come to them!

When the poet Isaiah was encouraging his people, one of the crucial lessons for them was to understand how God's glory was **complete** in them. ^{2*} But if they hoped to sit on the side-lines while someone else did the shining instead of them, then they would have missed their central role in God's vision." 60:5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice,..' for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you.

As inheritors of these ancient promises / words – this means **God's glory is completed in us** – he has glorified us to shine his light, his truth, his wisdom and **love** into our world; be it economics, the home, halls of learning, caravans of commerce, farmers in their fields... When we understand – **the light dawns on us** about this, we have a choice – to listen and follow – or do our own thing???

You see Herod at the point of understanding what was happening right before his eyes – did his own thing Matthew says and killed all the little boys in and around Bethlehem. *Presumably* using a margin of error for when the 'child, born to be king was actually born', *and remember* he enquired diligently from the Mage when they believed the child had been born, Herod **chose** to eliminate the threat to his throne, removing all those 2 year old and under, little boys. Cv

The religious authorities of Herod's Jerusalem, well; the light certainly dawned on them, and they chose to do their own thing. They went about business as usual which probably meant hiding from Herod's murderous wrath! What they did not do was **follow the light** to offer their gifts and bow in adoration before an obscure little boy, in an obscure little town, 'far' from their busy, important temple in Jerusalem... No, that activity was left to the gentiles, foreigners, outsiders ... to do! CV

This Sunday is all about the recognition that light does indeed dawn on us – and our understanding is **forever changed**. It is our choice if we accept; get involved; allow God to be at work in us or not. The major challenge I have is that when the 'not' option is chosen – it is *for me* a form of death. One of those 'little' deaths that happen when we walk away from God's shining light. We miss another point of living the way God in Jesus tells us is the best!

The little boy, born to be king **was we believe** the Light of God's glorious presence with us. He didn't keep it to himself. ^{3*} He came to set the world on fire, *not fire of judgment*, but of passion, lighting our souls and hearts so that if we choose, we too can shine **with the compassion and love and care of God**.

It is not only magi from the East who have gifts to offer in worship, we have gifts that can be set before our God; gifts that allow us to shine with Christ light so that the world may get a glimpse of God's glory. So the world may know the light of the world has dawned. Amen.