

Feast of the Epiphany
Isaiah 60.1-6/Ephesians 3.1-12/Matthew 2.1-12
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
6 January 2008

Where is the Child?

~Paul H. Friesen~

You can see this morning that the advent wreath is still with us, and opposite it, the crèche scene, set up by the children on Christmas Eve. It hasn't been put away.

But this is not a mistake! In fact, the whole season of Christmas (the twelfth day was yesterday) is wrapped up by the final celebration of the Epiphany.

All of these Christmas celebrations are meant to help us take the Scriptures seriously, especially that summary about Jesus, in the creed: 'who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.'¹ Jesus the Son of God, has come *among* us, *for* us.

This is the meaning of what we call the incarnation: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes on him may not perish but have eternal life.'² This is the good news we call the Gospel, which is the centre of our worship whenever we meet together.

But what is the meaning of our particular celebration of the journey of the Magi, these strange astronomer-priests who come from a land in the East and ended up on the pages of our Bible?

The Apostle Paul says it very plainly: 'In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed... Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.'
Today we celebrate the journey of the Magi because we, like them, and others around the world, have seen Jesus revealed.

When we have met Christ in faith, and in baptism, and in worship we begin to reflect the wonder and glory of God, like the moon reflects the sun. That is why we have just sung out the wonderful words of Isaiah: *Arise, shine, for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord is upon you.*

This sort of talk, of course, often seems mystical and impractical.

¹ As translated in *The Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: ABC, 1985), p.189.

² *John* 3.16. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted otherwise.

But it has been ‘talked’ by the Scriptures and by the church from the very beginning.

When the Magi found Christ, they were changed by their encounter, and they could not help but worship him, and they could not help but take the glory of the Christ child away with them.

It is the same for us who have seen the wonderful mystery revealed: that God was born in our world in the person of Jesus Christ, for our good, not for our.

Matthew’s Epiphany story can help us carry the wonder of meeting Christ into the life we share together. How?

Well, the answer lies in the simple question of the magi themselves. ‘Where is the child?’ they asked when they arrived in Jerusalem about the year 4 b.c., the year of Jesus’ birth.

But before we can learn how to ask this question ourselves, the right way, we need to know *how* the Magi asked their question. And before we can understand the Magi, we need to see and *how not* to ask the question. But it all has to do with how we ask the question, ‘Where is the child?’

In the Epiphany story, Herod did not ask the question ‘Where is the child?’ as the Magi did. Instead, we hear: ‘Herod secretly called for the wise men [the Magi] and [said]...when you have found him bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage...[but] having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.’

We know that Herod did not ask the question with worship in mind. A few verses later in Matthew’s Gospel we hear: ‘When Herod heard he had been tricked by the [Magi] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem.’

It was perhaps only the boys, and was only those under two, and it was a small town, so perhaps only a dozen or twenty—but it still was the ‘slaughter of the innocents’ as it has been called, a day still kept in the Christian calendar.

Where is the child? Herod the Great was not a Jew. He was appointed by the Roman invaders, and was now old, in the last year of his reign, and quite paranoid. He was fearful from the very beginning of this story, today’s Gospel tells us.

What if this ‘boy born King’ was a true descendant of the line of King David? The child threatened everything this illegitimate king stood for.³

³ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p.35-36, and W.F. Allbright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 15.

'Where is the child?' Herod asked. He did not want to worship, like the Magi. He wanted to find the child to silence him, however he could. This is the way in which he asked the question.

And the question is still being asked today in this fearful way, this terrifying way. Because fear often makes the powerful resort to violence. It is violence that the fearful rulers turned to as they faced Jesus at his trial. Sadly it is still the same today, sadly even amongst Christians.

The last issue for 2007 of a well-known, international newspaper has revealed Herod's approach repeated in today's world.⁴

It is in the villages of the Niger River delta some are asking the question, 'Where is the child?' Sadly it is Christian prophets and pastors and evangelists and parents, the leaders, who are asking the question in Herod's voice.

'Where is the child?' they ask the one accused of witchcraft. They single these children out. And they are children, almost always age 10 are younger. They are children with abnormalities, or who don't obey their parents or other authorities as they should, and so they are diagnosed as being witches.

If they do not have the devil driven out of them by exorcism, or beating, or poison, the children are left to die, or are abandoned. Thank God for some local resisters who don't believe these children are witches and take in distant relatives, and thank God for one couple, Sam and Elizabeth Ikpe-Itauma who house and feed and nurse over 130 of these children.

'Where is the child?' When Sam and Elizabeth ask the question, they ask it as the Magi. They know of course there was only one Christ child. But they worship God by the blessing of those poor children, made in the image of God, with the face of Christ. Because in meeting these children, they see the glory of God that is revealed in every human face.

They see the glory of Epiphany that is missed in our own land, the glory of an unborn child, about to be aborted. They see God's glory, which can be seen in the face of the disabled, those in hospices, and hospitals, those begging for food, from whom we are very tempted to turn our faces.

In Jesus' famous Gospel parable the puzzled worshippers ask: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food...or saw you a stranger and welcomed you...[or] saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

⁴ Tracy McVeigh, 'Child abuse in the name of God,' *The Guardian Weekly* (21 December 2007-3 January 2008), p.38-39. The charity which is supporting the surviving children can be located at www.steppingstonesnigeria.org. The author is wrong about one thing: there is no reference in the New Testament book of *Galatians* to the 'killing [of] witches'.

And Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."⁵

Where is the weak one, where is the child? In fact the Magi were the first in the Epiphany story to ask the question, and their intention is very clear. There is no secrecy, no fear. They are the ones to teach us how to ask this question truthfully.

*'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews, For we observed his star at the rising, and have come to pay him homage...On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.'*⁶

They wanted to worship Christ, the saviour, the king of the kingdom of heaven. And they provided wonderful gifts, fit for a king.

That is what we hope to do on Sundays around the year. The magi are wonderful examples to us at the beginning of the year. They inspire us to not count the cost of the journey, the time, the energy, the inconvenience.

They inspire us to journey towards Jesus and to offer all we have through music, and art, and money, and the use of our bodies and voices in worship. We are meant to kneel down and open our treasure chests right here at St. Paul's. And that is exactly what we are doing here this morning.

And this can't help but have consequences, throughout the week. So I would like to repeat a little anecdote about an old British custom:

*'In the Middle Ages it was the custom for the rich and powerful to make offerings in church of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This is still done by the Queen in England in a service in the Chapel Royal, St. James's Palace, where two Gentlemen Ushers make the offering at the altar on her behalf. The gift of twenty-five golden sovereigns is changed into notes and distributed to the aged poor, the frankincense is used in church, and the myrrh is given to a hospital.'*⁷

This is what we have tried to do with our Christmas gifts to Christ in our own Church—we have worshipped Christ in the sanctuary, and we have worshipped Christ this Christmas with our outreach programmes in our neighbourhood—in the Memorial Room, in our Parish House, and in St. George's parish hall.

⁵ Matthew 25.37-40.

⁶ Matthew 2. 2,11.

⁷ *The Christian Calendar*, ed. L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer (Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C Merriam Company, 1974), p.33-34.

'Where is the child?' asked the Magi. If we ask the question truthfully, we ask it with the heartfelt intention to worship. And the true worship of Christ not only praises Christ's name.

True worship cannot help being useful to God's creatures at the very same time.

'Where is the child?' Let's ask the question week as we get ready to gather around the table today, so that we can say with the Magi: 'for we have come to pay the child homage.'

And let's agree to ask the question this afternoon as we get ready for our weekly routines, and plan to share our gifts with those who need them—to open our treasure chests. Where is the child?

Where is the glory of the Lord revealed? This is worship, too.

Jesus said: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Amen.