

Feast of the Epiphany  
Isaiah 60.1-6/Ephesians 3.1-12/Matthew 2.1-12  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
4 January 2009

~Paul H. Friesen~

We have gathered again to worship this second Sunday after Christmas; a wonderful and necessary thing for Christians, together—at one time, in one place—not in privacy or with convenience.

And as always for Christians, we have gathered not to 'worship in general'. And we haven't gathered to worship with our eyes on ourselves, with the emphasis on our comforts or our preferences as worshippers.

It is good to name, no matter how obvious, who it is we have come to worship—God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And it is right to say that it is God who makes our act of worship possible, whatever little we think we have to offer as gifts at this service of worship.

Today we worship God in a certain way; this is Epiphany Sunday, two days before the traditional date of the Epiphany which is the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. It's the day that caps the 12 days of Christmas, the season of our celebrations of the birth of Christ, beginning on Christmas Eve in this place—lessons and carols and pageants and concerts and the Eucharist itself.

The most obvious meaning of our celebration of the Epiphany is that we have not gathered to worship a local deity beloved by a particular clan—Canadian, or North American, or Anglican.

Our traditional collect, our prayer for the day, puts it this way: 'O God [thou] didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles...' By Gentiles, of course, our Scriptures mean everyone not born into Judaism.

And our modern collect puts it this way; 'Eternal God...Guide by your light the nations of the earth, that the whole world may know your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

And maybe there is nothing more helpful to sort out the meaning of our worship of God today than what we make of this strange story of the magi and the king.

There are really two stories to help us.

There is the story of the magi, the 'wise men', who by tradition came from Babylon (Persia; Iraq) in 'the east' to worship a toddler in a distant land (Israel)

reduced to a small province by a mighty empire (the Roman Empire) which occupied it with its soldiers.

And in the middle of the story of the magi is the story of the king of this little province, the man called Herod, 'Herod the Great'.

This morning we are asked to choose one of these two stories and make it our story this week.

*The first story is the story of the foreign magi.* The magi, the wise men, were inquirers in the days before science and theology, and astrology and astronomy were divided from each other. They watched the heavens to discern the meaning of earthly life, and their watching led them on a journey.

It is quite possible their journey began about the time of the birth of Christ—we aren't told. The poet T.S. Eliot put their journey in verse, about the time he was received by baptism into the church—the Anglican church in his case—after his own journey through agnosticism.

*A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For the journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.<sup>1</sup>*

Again, we can't know what exactly it cost the magi; in any case it took them some time and a lot of trouble to make this unlikely journey.

It is possible they knew the Jewish community in their land, for there were synagogues far to the east of ancient Israel by this time. But they arrived in Jerusalem without much political or theological certainty, and asked naïve questions.

Their arrival in Jerusalem became a bit of a scandal—foreigners looking for a 'child born king' in a land whose King had not just fathered a child.

They arrived looking for direction and were summoned, secretly for an audience with the King of the Land, who consulted the theologians of the land and gave the magi an answer, asking the magi to name the child so the King of the land could worship him too.

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<sup>1</sup> He was baptized in 1927, so his poem 'Journey of the Magi' seemed to have been written then. It is said he borrowed these opening lines from a Christmas, 1622 sermon by the famous Anglican theologian Lancelot Andrewes. See [www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/291.html](http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/291.html).

The magi offered no gifts to the king of the land, but when they arrived in Bethlehem, the birth-city of David—who was the ancient King of Israel, King of the Jews—the magi offered the child the gifts they had carried so long.

They were overwhelmed with joy, the story tells us, and bowed down before the child, and gave extravagantly—gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. They gave gifts worthy of a king’s birth and life and death. And then they left the child and his mother and went home, because it was only worship they had come for.

*The second story is about the reigning King of the land.*

Herod’s days were coming to a close after a reign of 35 years or so. He was a puppet king, but not an Israelite; imposed by the Roman Emperor on a troublesome nation who insisted on worshipping their own god. And for every eager collaborator in the land there was a zealot or a scribe who challenged his rule.

Herod felt he had done a good job of it. He had overseen the rebuilding of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. It was a bold experiment that ended a few generations later. Give the Jews their temple back, the one we destroyed, and let them worship their god, but make them acknowledge the Emperor in Rome as Lord of all.

Herod kept the peace, but he was paranoid, and as a good friend once told me paranoid men are dangerous—insecure men are a threat to those around them. Those who hold power but are uncertain of their authority move quickly to remove threats.

So Herod provided the information the wise men wanted, but planned to eliminate the child with a local genocide, as the story following this morning’s Gospel reveals. This was the final consequence of Herod’s religion. He was outwitted, but tragedy remained.

*It might seem foolish to ask ourselves to choose one of these stories when the two are so dramatically opposed to each other, and we are gathered here to worship Christ on the Feast of Epiphany.*

*But the story of Herod lurks around the edges of the church—it always has—and sometimes it seems to us the prudent story, the right story to enter into.*

Weren’t the Christian Crusades of the Middle Ages seen to be the right thing to enter into—crusades that soon crumbled into the slaughter of both Moslems and Christians by the crusaders, and the death of children lured in to them? Doesn’t it seem prudent for the church to bow to the mighty at the right time, to uphold the peace, even if peace covers a multitude of unjust practices?

Doesn't it seem wise to worry more about temples—and church buildings—about board, and bricks and mortar—then to enter the difficult story of the living community worshipping the living God, with all the uncertainties and disagreements and tragedies that are a part and parcel of all living realities?

*On the other hand the story of the magi is difficult*—there are boundaries to cross and distances to travel to get to the child born king. There are dangers, always, if we persist in worshipping the Christ who was crucified before he arose and ascended into glory.

And above all, what do we have to offer in worship? Isn't it true that we are sinners, who need to keep repenting? Isn't it true that we are not saints like these magi? Isn't it true that our gifts—our time, our abilities, our financial resources—are slender, even non-existent, in view of the Kings of our world, in view of monster corporation and mega-churches?

The Eastern Church, often called the Orthodox Church has thought much about the Epiphany. So as a response to these doubts it would be good to hear one of their leaders, a Russian priest who preached in the years after the revolution, while in exile in Paris, a man cut off from the powerful church of his past.

This is what he leaves us with in his homily called "The Gifts of the Magi":

*What can we bring from the meagreness of our love,  
from the emptiness of our souls,  
from the darkness of our lives?*

*Can it be that we stand here with empty hearts and empty hands?*

*But this cannot be!*

*We desire to bring him gifts, and we have them;  
for it is [God] himself who had enriched us.*

*[God] made us in his in his image and [gave] us his gifts  
which we must find in ourselves, opening our treasure-house.<sup>2</sup>*

We know that the story of the magi is the story for us.

The only thing that remains is for us to discover the gifts that we are to give while we worship the child born king.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, in *Churchly Joy: Orthodox Devotions for the Church Year*, trans. Boris Jakin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 33-34.

