

Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7, 10-13; Matthew 2:1-12

It is not by accident, that the Bible opens with the thunderous acclaim; “In the beginning, God”. And on this first Sunday of Epiphany, the Magi, those un-named, un-numbered, mysterious men, from the East, exemplify what it is to be God-centered – to give up all, to search for, and to worship the Emmanuel – the God with us.

In the folklore of our faith, as in the final hymn that we will sing this morning, they are counted as three, and given the names--Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In some artistic portrayals of the Magi, they are given distinctive racial features--Melchior, European; Balthasar, African; and Caspar, Asian. And, through the years, these men have also been characterized as kings. Depictions to represent people and kingdoms from around the world, coming to seek Jesus.

As an aside, it is said that it was their carved images on the huge main doors of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem that saved the church from being destroyed by the invading Turks, and Persians before them, when they recognized images of their ancestors there. One thing that is clear, is that they were not of lowly estate. Herod and all of Jerusalem would not have been distressed if three peasants came seeking the newborn king. Matthew writes, “*Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.’*” I doubt that three so called ‘ordinary folk’ would have had such a disturbing impact on Herod and his advisors.

The Magi have also been called Wise Men. They certainly appear to be students of the stars. Astrologers, perhaps. They had seen a particular star, a star unlike any other, and they followed it until it came to Jerusalem, and then to the house where the young child lay.

It is a stirring drama. Magi, kings, wise men, astrologers. European, African, Asian, of untold number. These mysterious men of today’s gospel. These men of whom Isaiah and the Psalmist prophesized. The first of those mentioned in Isaiah, who recognized the time to arise when their light had come, and the glory of the Lord shone upon them (*Isaiah 60:1*). The first of those Isaiah said would come from far away, bringing their camels from Midian, Ephah and Sheba and their gifts of gold and frankincense, proclaiming the praise of the Lord (*Isaiah 60:6*). The first kings, of whom the psalmist says, will come, kings of Tarshish and the Isles, and of Sheba and Seba, who will come to render tribute, to offer their service, to fall down before him bringing their gifts. (*Psalm 72:10,15*)

WHY? Because this new baby of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), was a baby like no other, was born to be the Messiah of Isaiah 53, a king without equal, the light of the world (John 1:4), who will reign like none other. Of whom King David, in the last of his Psalms (72) says, ‘*will deliver the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He will have pity on the weak and the needy, and save the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he will redeem their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.*’

Yes, these Magi, of whom not much is known, are the first of the Gentiles, to recognize this foretold Saviour. One born to save, not just the Jews, but also us, Gentiles, so that together with those Magi we, as St Paul writes (Eph 5-11), *'might witness and bear the boundless riches of Christ in our lives, and make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God so that through us, the Church, we might make it known to rulers, and authorities in the heavenly places'*.

Yes, though little is known of these Magi except their obedience to journey and the gifts they brought. They were **men of action**. They saw the star, knew its significance, followed it, and worshipped the Emmanuel, God with us. We too share that call to action. That call to worship, that call to act and to give in love, and, as St Peter asks, that call to be always be ready to share, with those who ask, the hope we have within us. (1 Peter 3:15)

And today it is also, 'The Baptism of the Lord' Sunday, and linked as it is with the Epiphany we really begin to see the fullness of what this birth of Jesus means.

In the Incarnation, God has healed the possibility of a communion relationship with us by touching human nature with the Divine, in the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ.

With the Magi at the Epiphany, Jesus touched people who were once seen to be far off -- maybe even unclean --

Those entering into, or living in, the stables of life, that I talked about last Thursday.

But it doesn't stop there. The Baptism of the Lord is, like Epiphany, part two, just one wise man this time, John the Baptist, and in this Epiphany Jesus emerges not from the waters of his Mother but from the waters of creation and, as such, reminds us that Jesus' coming has always been about the whole of creation too. God came to us in Christ, not for humanity alone, 'God so loved the WORLD', the rivers, the air, the mountains, the soil, plants and trees – the animals, fish, birds and our siblings all. As (Psalm 148) reminds us. All creation yearns for redemption with us, typified in the prophets, the star, the hay, the animals, the heralding angels, shepherds and Magi and today the water, a different Magi John the Baptist, the descending of the dove, and the thunder of God's voice and the sending into the wilderness.

So, in this year ahead -- urgent as it has ever been -- may we not forget this wider kinship we have in Christ, with whom we must all be saved. And, with Jesus, in our own baptized lives, let us be immersed in the streams and oceans, and walk the mountain tops and Glens, that we might feel their tears; that we be so rooted in the earth, that God might hear its groaning too. And like the Magi, including John, offer him our very best gifts, even the gift of ourselves for the sake of all in God's kingdom.

+ Rob Hardwick