

Sunday 4 January 2009: Epiphany

The Magi, their gifts and us

Readings: Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-12

The Magi brought three gifts to the child who has been born king of the Jews. So, at the risk of sounding like a preacher from the Reduced Sermon Company, this sermon has three sections about the Magi, the gifts and us.

The Magi

were mysterious, magical, powerful but above all Gentiles, non-Jews, from the East who came to worship the babe of Bethlehem. At the start of Matthew's Gospel they show us where the Gospel will take us. Christ is a son of David, he comes from the Jews, but he is for the whole world. Matthew makes a particular point that the ministry of Jesus's lifetime is *not* to anyone other than Jews but at the end of Matthew's Gospel the risen Christ, just before his ascension, gave his disciples, and gives us his hearers, the 'great commission':

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing people everywhere in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.

We have grown used to hearing this as making an exclusive claim for Christ but there is an ancient and well attested tradition of interpretation that is pluralistic and inclusive. *In Xanadu* the travel writer William Dalrymple tells of *The Travels* of Marco Polo and of his discovering the tombs of the Magi in the Persian city of Saveh, in modern Iran. They did not convert to Christianity but they worshipped the Christ child and when they returned home kept the memory alive by the Zoroastrian use of fire. Dalrymple also remembers an account of the Persian defeat of the Byzantines in the seventh century in which they swept through Palestine destroying all the important buildings. The single exception was the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem because over the doorway was a huge mosaic of the recognisably Persian Magi bringing gifts to the Christ child. The building, and more than the building, survived because there was a connection with their own experience

The Gifts

brought by the Magi give us the eyes to see who Jesus is at the start of the Gospel - gold for a king, incense for God, and myrrh for the man who will die for the love of God, both used in the care of the dead and in healing.

They might also show the offering up of worldly power to the infant Christ: the gold of economic power, frankincense of religious power and myrrh, which was used in ink as well as for burials, the power of the media.

I very much liked a point made by Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor as a guest editor of the Today programme during the week. He was asked what he thought about the five Anglican bishops who criticised the government for being in thrall to money, as it were making an idol of gold. The Cardinal said he thought that what these bishops said was not the whole truth. He felt uncomfortable with blaming other people for things that have gone wrong economically. The

truth is that we've all been enthralled by money and have thought it can do more for us than it can. Rather than blame others, it would be more helpful to begin the process of conversion that is now needed with ourselves. My own gloss would be that the powers of this age need to rediscover the humility of God and the offering of the gifts of worldly power to the Christ child. Otherwise we get ourselves out of proportion, risk making idols of things, and fail to live in service to the love of God.

We

come to worship and we bring gifts. Each week this service is constructed from the gifts of those of us who gather and make an offering to God. It's not only the collection and the bread and wine being offered from the gifts God has given us. We offer the gifts of our skills and abilities. Our Stewards exercise a ministry of welcome which, if it did not reflect deep and personal commitments to hospitality would be vacuous. The preacher offers a sermon, its preparation is from the study of the scriptures and personal prayer as well as from the attentive pastoring of the community which seeks to live 'in Christ'. Our musicians bring their gifts in service of the church. Most of us know that even the creative have to struggle to produce what others see as 'gifted'; that it's 90% perspiration, 10% inspiration. To survive the pace of St Martin's there's a lot of slog which is sometimes a joy and sometimes just hard work. For our creative gifts to be realised we have to work at them. Stewards have personally to practice hospitality. Musicians have to practice. Clergy who lead worship in public have to pray in private, and so on.

Today we are commissioning Andrew Earis as our new Director of Music. He has been Acting Director since October and showed remarkable determination after he fell and broke his arm on his way to a service a few weeks before Christmas. He led the service before going to hospital and played one handed for us the day after! Andrew is a scientist as well as a musician. His first degree at Imperial was in Physics with Studies in Musical Performance. This led to a PhD in 'The extraction of performance parameters from acoustic recordings of piano music' and to publications such as, Earis, A., 'An Algorithm to extract expressive timing and dynamics from piano recordings'. He has been Director of Music at Wimbledon and District Synagogue as well as at St Sepulchre-without-Newgate, whilst doing research at the Royal College of Music and advising on the BBC's 'Songs of Praise'. This morning we are delighted to be commissioning him as our Director of Music.

In December a survey of British church musicians showed that the most popular carol is Harold Darke's setting of 'In the bleak mid-winter' with it's lovely verse:

What can I give him, poor as I am.
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.

The giving of presents is part of our celebration of Christmas because gifts help define our relationship with Christ and with each other.

I said there were three parts to this sermon but in truth there is a fourth, but perhaps it's the one sermon to which the parts each point.

With the horror of what we are seeing between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza this week someone asked me how it is possible for so many people to say they want peace for the new year and for us to be at war in so many places but especially in Israel and Gaza.

The answer seems to me to lie in some way in each of the three parts to this Epiphany sermon: The Christ child is for all the world.

God's extraordinary humility subverts our desire to gather earthly power to ourselves and calls us to lives of service.

And the offering of our gifts depends on our determination and self-discipline as much as our innate giftedness.

In Matthew's Gospel the story of the magi leads into the slaughter of the innocents, the children under two killed by Herod out of fear for the one born to be king. You don't have to live in Israel or Gaza to know that fear and violence are among the least attractive but most persistent aspects of human nature. The clue that we're serious about our gift of peace-making lies not out there by my blaming the failures of others, glaring though they are, but in here, with us, with me, with my own conversion.