

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

The Epiphany of our Lord *transferred* 4 January 2015

Isaiah 60.1-6 Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14 Ephesians 3.1-12 Matthew 2.1-12

When Matthew's community struggled to accept the outsiders who behaved as though they belonged, I assume they found some comfort in the story of the wise men visiting Jesus.

Think about it for a moment. The first disciples of Jesus are all Jewish. No surprise there, Jesus is the promised one of Israel sent to his own people. A few recognise him for who he is and come to a deeper trust in God. That's as it should be. Then, *goyim* start believing: gentiles, outsiders, strangers who don't keep the law and eat what they like. A rabbi from Tarsus who now follows Jesus is telling the Christian gatherings, the little ecclesias, the churches, that they should welcome these outsiders and not circumcise them first; not make them Jews before treating them as equals!

There is even a story going around that Peter had a vision of unclean foods which he told God he would never eat, and God said Peter was not to call unclean anything that God had made. (Acts 10.9-16) it's the end of their way of life as Matthew's community have known it - the Jerusalem Temple destroyed, the kosher laws and other boundaries said to be no longer necessary and that from a rabbi, and anyone, *anyone* and women or slaves as equals, *anyone* allowed to join by being baptised in Jesus' name.

Of course, it was all foreshadowed in the prophets. They had seen visions of all the nations streaming to the holy mountain to worship God. And deep down the Jews had always longed for all people to acknowledge God as the one and the only true divine One. It's a bit like us really – we love humanity; we just find people difficult.

In a community with tight boundaries and strong ties of kinship, any welcome to a stranger is also tightly controlled. So, hospitality is important; it could be a matter of life and death. But full acceptance is harder, more hedged about. There are prejudices to overcome, differences to try and understand; difficulties that have to be dealt with if the peace of the community is to be preserved. So, to hear again that when he was born Jesus received gifts from foreigners who travelled especially to worship him gave the comfort of knowing that changing from fear and rejection of the stranger was a matter of growing more like Jesus, more like a Jew faithful to God's new covenant, less like one clinging to the old.

And all this was changing the community, and the ways in which the community knew God. After all, for God to come as one of us, for God's 'word' once spoken by an angel, to take on flesh and blood, come to birth through the life of a young woman, there had to be a shaking and a shifting of previous understandings of how God comes to us.

God is now fleshed out before our eyes. Now, the extraordinary mystery we give the inadequate name God lives within the ordinary stuff of which we are made; is to be found within the ordinary stuff of each day. This seeing of God in a new light, the Christmas Word made flesh light, begins with seeing Jesus in a new light through the eyes of strangers from a far country. Epiphany is when we see all of the Christmas story in its true light and see our old familiar world in light of this strange new reality.

Being religious might actually prevent us from seeing this extraordinary truth, so we better take care. We can all be like Matthew's community finding it hard to credit that isn't just as we have always imagined.

Listen to this story of an epiphany one afternoon in the street. Thomas Merton, the well-known theologian who was born a hundred years ago this month, was a Trappist monk in Kentucky in America. He been carted around the world from an early age after his mother died when he was six. He went to schools and lived with various family in France, England and America before his found his real life in the silence of Gethsemane Abbey. He wrote over seventy books and other works before he died in 1968. Well, being a Trappist is like being a gold class Christian – it's not a life for the lukewarm. Trappists have a right to feel a bit superior to the rest of us, and for a time Merton did.

Thomas Merton went into town one afternoon carrying on his own judgement that the people in the street were less graced, less enlightened than he and his brothers in the monastery. As he sat on the bench in the street and watched people going about their lives a new and life changing insight came to him with stunning clarity. Here in his own words are what God showed him that day.

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race though it makes many terrible mistakes... and yet God himself glories in becoming a member of it... it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, where neither sin nor shadows can reach the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. Who will tell them they are all walking around, shining like the sun?

Seen in this light there are no parallel universes, just one creation. No being religious in church and then being secular at home or work; there is only being authentically human by being attentive to all that we are and all that we do each day. No finding Christ present in bread and wine but not in the face of the child in detention who can be ignored because unseen, or the cranky neighbour who might need to be called out and back into their humanity. There is nothing outside this one creation of God, no darkness, no loss, no death, no birth, no compassionate love and no joy that is not caught up into God. And so there is no harm, no hurt, no evil that cannot be overcome by God in God's constant though not yet completed re-creation of all that we are.

See the world in that light and you will see the familiar in a new light and will notice much that you had overlooked while among the people who walk in darkness. Gradually Matthew's community learned to live their stories but not before they accepted that in Jesus Christ God lives ours.

Colleen O'Reilly