

The EPIPHANY of our Lord. Matthew 2:1-12 6 January 2014

The wise men believed that heavenly portents marked the expected birth of a great leader. They were astrologers on a holy pilgrimage to find a king. I checked my astrological forecast for this week: "Passion-stirring planet Mars will go deep into your personality zone, to warm up a current relationship with someone special." If that's not my wife, I'm sunk.

The musical has the words: "It ain't necessarily so. The t'ings yo' is liable to read in the Bible, ain't necessarily so." We read in Isaiah (47:13) "Those stargazers, who foretell your future are like straw that fire will burn up. You will get no help from them." To Isaiah, these superstitious idolaters did not worship the star-making God. Their beliefs were incompatible with the God of grace. But our topsy-turvy God chose them! God chose them to come seeking the holy huddle around the Bethlehem manger. These Eastern pagans are from the wrong race, the wrong religion, the wrong culture, (just like the boat people emerging off Australia's northern shores). Yet, our God uses them to teach us that humankind must be inclusive of everyone, that we are all sisters and brothers, every race, language, skin colour, the likeable and the unlikeable, the strongly believing churchgoers and the barely recognizable ones, all are God's chosen family. It does puzzle me when folk say "I go to church to twice a year, at Christmas and Easter; I'm a *Christian*." It's like saying "I go to McDonald's twice a year. I'm a *quarter-pounder*." Today's gospel teaches: if our good God reaches out to pagan stargazers, God wills us to reach out to everyone.

To get a message to these magi, our infinitely creative God chose a perfect way. God sent a "star of wonder, star of night...westward leading, still proceeding." A God, who moved the *entire population* of the Roman world just so a carpenter called Joe may take his pregnant wife to where the prophet Micah said her child should be born, that God, could easily line up a few planets to catch the attention of eastern magi-magicians. But the magi would never have found the child had they not decided to set out. The magi put commitment to their conviction; they put feet to their faith and moved out on their faith journey.

Thank God, we, too, have seen his star and so come faithfully to Sunday church. Thank God, our God has gained our continuing attention on our earthly pilgrimage, and we don't prefer Sunday devotions tucked up in our warm beds. (Back to the story). Wanting knowledge, nearing Jerusalem, the magi took a terrible wrong turn. They were amazed that there were no bonfires, no street parties, no bunting arrayed to celebrate the kingly birth, so they stopped to ask King Herod. Their news frightened the daylights out of the would-be brutal baby butcher. Herod sought advice from the keepers of the holy scrolls to find where the babe was embedded, and, shrewd as a snake, he hissed the magi a cunning commission, to go and find the child for him to worship: read: to erase this threat to his throne.

Here was another amazement. The religious scholars of Jewry knew Micah's prophecy by heart (5:2); they were biblically literate but spiritually lazy. They knew the world-changing Messiah, for whom Jewry had long awaited, was born

not five miles away, but did nothing more about it. Am I like Herod's 'Yes' men? I read the *TMA* cover to cover, as a book-full theology blockhead, yet, is my faith only theory? Do I suffer from a lurking leprosy of comfortable indifference, unconcern and unforgiveness to all around me? Am I like the church-goer who boasted, "As soon as I retire, I will travel to Arabia and climb Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and read them there." His vicar quietly suggested, "Why don't you just stay home and keep them?"

At Bethlehem, the magi found a puzzled young mother, not a regal queen. Where they had envisaged palatial splendour, they found a stable of grinding poverty. (Mary may have even whispered when she saw the trio "Typical! They're just like the trams along High Street. You wait for ages, then three come together." Yet, without sceptre, orb or crown imperial, the baby still possessed more royalty than Herod in his palace. Somehow, they could see, that one day, this child would rule the world. Possibly kings themselves, they laid offerings before a more-mightier king, not the gifts usually given at a baby shower. 1) gold: for a king, but of immediate value to finance the family's sudden trip to Egypt; 2) sweet smelling incense: for Jesus the Temple priest, but of immediate value to ward off infection and reduce inflammation on the journey south; 3) myrrh: to anoint the dead, as the shadow of the cross fell on the crib, but of immediate value for all kinds of skin ailment in the desert crossing. Had the trio been three wise women, they may have been more practical with their plans and gifts; 1) they would have Googled map directions before they left, to avoid any run-in with Herod; 2) they would have arrived in time to tidy the stable and help deliver the baby; 3) they would have brought practical helps like a casserole, disposable nappies, baby wipes, a dummy pacifier, and, if one were a Jesuit, she would have offered Joe's lad a special rate at Xavier college. When they left, the women may have said, "That baby doesn't look anything like Joseph," and "I wonder will I get back my casserole dish?"

Are we stargazers or seekers after Christ? How far out of our comfort zone are we prepared to go constantly to find a King in a cradle and make a continual life-changing commitment to him? The King who comes has chosen us as uniquely necessary to his world family, and has mapped out a specific plan for our individual lives that none other can do.

May horrible Herod give us our New Year gospel resolution, "Go and search diligently for the child!" May we answer with the English carol? "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, I give him my heart."

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