

SERMON – “WHEN THE SONG OF THE ANGELS IS STILLED”
ST JAMES’, LOWER HUTT, THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY 2023

“When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins”

So goes the great poem by theologian Howard Thurman, and it’s an apt time to recall those words as we celebrate the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Epiphany.

Of course for many Christmas was done and dusted at midnight on December 25th, apart from the leftovers, and even for us the tendency is to see the key stories of Epiphany as part and parcel of the Christmas narrative, but in truth they represent the ongoing unfolding of the Christ story which in itself is part of the equally ongoing story of God and God’s people, and if we pause and listen we’re reminded that Christmas, as Thurman wrote, is itself a work in progress and while December 25th might focus on the lighter, brighter side of the story, there is a grittier side too, and a darkness that we need to recognise as very much a part of the whole.

Epiphany is the word we use to describe the feast and the season, but I’m not convinced it’s the most helpful term. Once upon a time our Anglican lectionary described this day as the Revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, and other denominations have their own names such as The Manifestation and event Three Kings Day. But if I were naming this season myself I’d like to call it something like The Feast of the Constant Incarnation because really that’s what it’s all about.

Let’s look to the reading. Matthew has given us version of the Christmas story in chapter one. It’s very stripped back so you can see why we go with Luke’s much more cinematic version at Christmas, but then Matthew has very different priorities to Luke. Matthew goes to great lengths to ground the Jesus story in a specific time and place *within* the prophetic history of the Jewish people. So here, today, he begins with In the time of King Herod.

Now’s not the time for an in-depth exploration of Herod the Great, but suffice to say he was a complicated kind of king – half Jewish, half Gentile, maintained as something of a puppet monarch by the occupying Romans and very occupied with keeping his place. Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking about a child who would be king.

A couple of side-notes here – we're never told how many people came. The idea of there being three comes from the number of gifts we hear about later. Likewise there are various translations of what is rendered as "wise men" here, but what most scholars believe is that these were followers of Zoroastrianism, a religious philosophy that places great emphasis on astrology which at the time was considered a genuine science, and there were probably from Persia, or our modern day Iran.

Let's pause. So what we have is a small group, possibly three, maybe not, of Iranian scientists, practitioners of an eastern religion, being drawn to the beating heart of Judaism to witness the acts of a God they didn't believe in.

Are we starting to see there's more to this story than the Christmas carols might suggest?

Herod hears about this search for a king of the Jews and sets out to find and ultimately neutralise the threat, and given these foreign scientists have made it this far he sends them on to find out more.

Following the star, whatever that means, they find the house in Bethlehem where the Holy Family is staying, which they enter to pay homage and offer gifts. Note, that some time has probably passed because there's no manger or inn, but that said Matthew doesn't mention either anyway, so we don't really know. And after a warning in a dream – very common in Matthew – the scientists head for home and not back to Herod. And that's it for today's reading, which is a shame because the rest of the chapter is significant.

In brief, we get the flight into Egypt, where Mary, Joseph and Jesus become essentially refugees to escape Herod's pogrom. Then there's the massacre of the innocents, where Herod supposedly had all the children in and around Bethlehem under the age of two killed, something that historically probably never happened, but which works well for Matthew's purposes. And then finally Herod dies, the family returns and sets up a home in Nazareth from whence the story continues.

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins.

And what a work it is. Today, two weeks after the Feast of the Nativity, I want to invite us to look up from our cribs and our trees and our decorations and our gifts, and see with fresh eyes the whole sweeping story that Christmas presents.

Shepherds are called from fields, angels converge on a stable, wise scientists who followed another faith are drawn to the place where Jesus lays. This Jesus who would be King of the Jews is welcomed by a strange and unexpected crowd before being taken to another country to live as an outcast in the face of danger and death. In this story God reaches out and out and out some more to embrace and include all manner of people in the unfolding of the divine presence and it's hard to over-estimate just how unexpected that was in its context. But, as Thurman reminds us, it's only the beginning.

From here we continue our liturgical journey into the year where we will hear once again that Jesus constantly makes God's embrace bigger. He eats with sinners and outcasts, he touches people who are sick and disabled and even in a few cases dead. He aligns himself with women and tax collectors and Samaritans, and also with the rich and the powerful, religious leaders and scribes and Pharisees.

To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.

These, Thurman's poem continues, are the works that Christmas begins. Works that always and everywhere draw in rather than push away. Works that include rather than keep out. Works that challenge the natural human and religious tendency to protect, preserve, to control and constrict who's in and who's out, to make tidy our world and our faith so as to keep it within our grasp – yet God's grasp doesn't work like that. In its whole the Christmas story is messy and slightly chaotic. It doesn't follow the right script or involve the correct people. In short, it begins the way the Gospel continues and the way it has always continued, right through to here and now in our messy and increasingly chaotic world.

So you see it's not so much an epiphany as a flash of light and sudden realisation, but more a constant incarnation, wherein every day in the least expected ways God comes to us, stands with us, celebrates with us and weeps with us. To find us, heal us, feed us, release us, rebuild us, bring peace to us and to ultimately make music in our hearts. May that be our promise and our challenge this Epiphany. Amen.

Brian Dawson. 8/1/23

