

Sermon

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are still in the season of Christmas - and the gospel readings are inviting us to ponder another of the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus - the journey of the Magi - the wise men - to the worship the baby Jesus in the manger. The word "Epiphany" means "to be made manifest" so the essence of today's feast is the revelation of Christ to the whole world. We celebrate God's "showing up in our midst" in the person of Jesus Christ; and because the Magi were Gentiles rather than Jews, this day announces that Christ is for everyone, not just the people of Israel.

A few years ago the community choir of which I was a member presented Gian Carlo Menotti's one act opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. The story is about three magi who stop on their way to Bethlehem at the hovel of a poor crippled boy named Amahl. When Amahl hears of their mysterious search for a child, he secretly follows along behind. He watches in awe as the Magi present their gifts to the baby Jesus. He is disturbed that he

has no appropriate gift of his own to offer Jesus until it occurs to him that he can offer the only thing he has: his crutches. As he presents his crutches, he is healed. This is something of an apocryphal story, prone to a great deal of sentimentalism. Indeed, some people seem to find it very moving. Certain ladies in our choir would weep even as the story was recounted before singing even got under way! Nevertheless, the focus of the story is on the giving of gifts and the offering worship to the Christ-child.

Matthew's story, though, has much more to say. Matthew wants us to know that in the birth of Jesus, God comes into our history. God is revealed in person for all of us. Christ opens to us the reality of God. In the birth of Christ, God comes to us not in terms of force and power and might, but in terms of love and peace. The birth of this Jesus means the mystery long hidden is now revealed. Now we can see that God's deepest concern is our salvation. God is now present in person to join us in the struggle to overcome the forces of evil. God comes to show us that our salvation is accomplished not in flight from this world, but by facing up in person to confront the problems we face. Salvation

will be accomplished within this wounded world of our fellow human beings.

And so we see the story of Christ's birth already pointing to the cross; to the redemptive work of Jesus in his passion, death and resurrection. The birth of Jesus and his passion, death and resurrection are never separated in the public prayer of the church. The mysteries of incarnation, atonement and redemption are entwined together. Already, the visit of the Magi has all Jerusalem perturbed, and Herod is going about his wicked ways to plot the death of Jesus, aided and abetted by the chief priests and the scribes. Just like the evil Pharaoh long ago, who tried to kill Moses in Egypt, so Herod plots his evil ways against the new Moses. But this is God's story, and the might of Herod will not succeed. The promise of salvation cannot be procured by the use of force or military might or a political philosophy or by cornering a large chunk of wealth. God alone is the source, and God will accomplish what God has begun.

On another level then, Matthew's account is a dramatic presentation of the truth that is spoken about in the letter to the

Ephesians, that the Gentiles "are heirs with us, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Jesus Christ." Traditionally, the Gentiles were excluded from the promise given to Israel through Abraham. They were thought to have been alienated from God. But Matthew's brilliant story of the Magi has the gentiles come from the East, receiving the revelation of the star. They are portrayed as the first to pay homage to the new-born King of the Jews. The impenetrable wall between Jew and Gentile is smashed down. Both have access to God. The birth of Jesus is for the unity of all creation - all people are now able to be one in Christ - the lowly and the well born, Jews and Gentiles, male and female. Christ is for all - God's salvation is for all.

The readings today, therefore, are telling about the implications the Christmas story has for us as church; the holy people of God. The Magi remind us that we are to be an open community of faith, embracing people of all races and all ages. In the traditional iconography of Christmas, the Magi are all various ages and with different coloured skin. All are included in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. From time to time I

am asked what this word Catholic is all about. The word Catholic means that the gospel is for all time and for all people everywhere. The Anglican Church, therefore is Catholic to the extent that we embrace the wide diversity of human beings everywhere in the world. The gospel is for all; the church embraces all. Putting it simply, that's what the word "Catholic" means. Like all things that sound simple, of course, it's always much more difficult to put into practise! No longer can we be a closed group, or a social club with hymns who happen to meet on Sundays. We have to be able to admit that God's revelation might come through outsiders, through those who arrive late to work in the vineyard of God, through those who have not earned their place in the commonwealth of God. That's a challenge for those who are passionate about faithfulness to the gospel.

If the Magi are an image of the Church for us, a church that is open to all and willing to embrace all, then we can note something else as well. The Magi are a people on the move. They are on a journey following the star of their hearts, the light of God to the source, which is Jesus. The end of their journey is simply to offer their lives to the new-born Christ in worship. The

Christian life is as simple, and yet as complicated as that. Faith is a journey. It involves journeying in faith and in trust and offering all that we have and all that we are to God.

The feast of Epiphany celebrated today is a celebration of gifts. Not gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; not even gifts of crutches given by a lowly child. Epiphany is a celebration of the unfathomable gift of the birth of Jesus. It is a celebration of the new possibilities opened up for the human race because of this gift of God to us.