The Nations shall see God's salvation

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Isa 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

Today we celebrate Epiphany. It's the 3rd January 2021: a fact and we have to believe it! Time is leading us further and further into the twenty-first century with new wonders of human endeavours in science and technology confronting us every day: "A vaccine for CoVID-19? Don't hold your breath!" they said. Bit of a sick pun. But the doubters were wrong! Those who saw the star and travelled faithfully towards it's light found what was thought improbable, and have shared this disease-preventive with the world.

We're at a time when more of us than ever before are aware of the vulnerability of all life on Earth, and the preciousness of life. When more of us than ever before are aware of the damage human populations can do to planet Earth. When more of us than ever before, are aware of the dangers to life on Earth, not only from ourselves, but from external events, such as a pandemic, or a collision with an asteroid. No wonder those who think about such things become anxious.

Matthew 2: 1-12

In this season of epiphany, we remember that our soul's travel, like the souls of the wise men, begins with seeking the Christ-child. The magi found him in an unexpectedly ordinary place, but saw him for who he was and is for us: Son of God, the promised Messiah of Judaism, king above all worldly kings and rulers.

St. Matthew shows us that awe and humility are not attributes solely of the poor and lowly. The shepherds in St. Luke's gospel saw wonders in the heavens, came to the place where Jesus lay, and worshipped. Likewise, those magi, kings and spiritual authorities in their own lands, came and worshipped, just as Queen Elizabeth will do in the chapel royal on Wednesday, the 6th of January, the actual feast day. As we know, her family motto is 'Ich dien', 'I serve'. The magi too bowed their heads and were able to bring gifts from their material wealth: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We find ways of bringing our gifts to the Christ-child. Each of us is in a sense a king, in that we make our own decisions, yet each of has at some point voluntarily decided to come to the Christ-child. I remember coming to church as a thirty-something wife and mother, and wondering: I know about Jesus, but how is he Son of God? Each of us has come to face him and brought whatever it was that we thought identified us, the kind of people, group, tribe, category even, to whom we felt we belonged.

Like the wise men, once we've seen and experienced for ourselves the saving love of Christ, God helps us to keep him alive and guard him from the Herods of our age.

When I was Chaplain and Student Counsellor at St. Mark's College, a residence and community of university students, an exchange student who'd grown up in Eastern Germany under Soviet communism told me: "When I was thirteen, I wanted very much to be confirmed. I had to choose. Confirmation in my church meant I would not be allowed to go to university at the end of secondary school. I chose to be confirmed. In 1989, the Berlin wall came down and things started to change." And there she was in the mid- nineties, a university exchange-student.

A woman in her 50s was quoted in a newspaper last weekend

(Weekend Australian, 26-27th December 2020) of how her she was guided to find Jesus, the anointed king of Christians' hearts, minds, and wills: "I was 16 when my classmate shared the Gospel with me. She invited me to join a small Christian fellowship. I found that God was touching my heart and found a peace with Jesus which is hard to express." Christians are forbidden to share the gospel. As of early this year (2020), it is illegal for those under 18 years to attend church in China.

Back in 2010, to enter China on a holiday visa in 2010, I had to sign a declaration that I would not proselytize while I was there, as the missionaries had many years ago. However, a market stall-holder told a friend and me of his faith and experience as a Chinese Christian. How it was that because he and his wife acted in faith to keep their second child, he lost his prized government job and became a stall-holder for his artist-wife.

Why the Herods' calculating, sometimes murderous fury? The love of God cannot be controlled.

From the Christ-child we celebrate today shines forth the both the creative and redeeming power of love. His mother, Mary said 'Yes' to God in faith, even though she would have realised the predicament she would bring to herself and her family. Both St. Luke and St. Matthew are at great pains to show by genealogy that Jesus was not only of good family, something greatly prized in the Middle Eastern culture of his day, but indeed royal, in the line of King David, no less. Since she was betrothed to Joseph, in a marriage contract that would have required divorce to dissolve, some might have accused her of adultery, others might have blamed her father for not protecting her. The situation was a mess. It was Joseph's love of God, which went against *his* self-interest, that redeemed her, bestowed the righteousness of the law on her as his wife. Together they presented Jesus at the Temple

as their first-born son, thus sealing the legitimacy of Jesus. Mary's love and Joseph's love united in Jesus. The grace of love and the requirements of law reconciled. Heaven and earth united in the Christ-child.

There he lay under the gaze of men who had travelled far from lands east of Judah. It was from lands of the east that powerful kings had conquered Israel, destroyed the Temple, taken the people into exile, and eventually restored them. Wise men of the eastern nations to whom Israel had been forced to pay tribute and homage brought their tribute and paid homage in true humility to this child. Here was another reconciliation. The magi protected Jesus by not returning to Herod. They knew that he understood, loved, and served only one thing: his power. The power of loving kindness and mercy, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation were beyond him. Such power gives light to the world: makes a kinder, gentler world.

If Matthew and Luke knew the story of his birth, Jesus must have known. It begs the question: could he who knew that his being was the will of God, God's Word to the world, could he have gone against his divine nature when the time came for him to choose between God's will and self-interest? We who know the rest of his life-story know that he chose to face peacefully those who caused his suffering and death. However, enough for us to celebrate today the Christ-child, Prince of Peace: God's gift to us.