The inclusivity of Jesus

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Epiphany: Isa 60 1-6 Ps 72 1-7 10-14 Eph 3.1-12 Mt 2.1-12

I visited my Mum's parish in Melbourne last Sunday and I was particularly struck by the welcome on their pew-sheet. *All baptized Christians, regardless of their denomination, church affiliation or irregular or non-attendance, are welcomed, invited, and encouraged to receive Communion with us or to come forward for a blessing.* One of the most important things God calls us to do is to welcome visitors of all kinds to participate as completely as they can in the Church community.

So I remember being shocked once when at a Requiem Eucharist I announced a welcome to participate for communicant members of all denominations, and afterwards, someone told me they felt I'd excluded them. They weren't communicants anywhere else, so they saidt I was explicitly excluding them.

It's hard when a welcome is heard as a keep-out notice. There are several questions this raises – do we have conditions of entry; conditions of participation; should we? A useful test is to ask the old *WWJD* question – *What would Jesus do?*

This is particularly the question to ask at the feast of the Epiphany; the day when the baby Jesus hosted outsiders – foreign astrologers whose practice is frowned on by many parts of the Church and by Judaism. Epiphany is a good time to consider the extent of Christ's welcome. Epiphany celebrates the day when representatives of the known world were called and received into the presence of the God of Israel – welcomed. Who was welcomed to Bethlehem? Was there anyone Jesus would have left out? Let's think carefully about everyone who was actually welcomed at Bethlehem. Who did Jesus have there to celebrate his birth?

First, there are his parents. We know Joseph and Mary aren't married yet. If you don't think Matthew's trying to make a point of this, look back a chapter at his record of Jesus's family tree. You find four other women named there who were illegal or unclean according to the Hebrew Scriptures *(Tamar – incest, Rahab – prostitution, Ruth – forbidden inter-racial marriage and Bathsheba – adultery)*.

So if what we are seeing in our Holy Family is the first ever Christian gathering, this bids fair for a very broad-minded Church indeed. But it doesn't stop there. Luke's gospel that we heard at Christmas tells us that Mary and Joseph have to use a manger, an animal-feed trough, as a bed for Jesus. The earliest Church began in a cave at the back of the house; the place where the animals lived. The story gives us a donkey, cattle and sheep as Jesus's fellow tenants; doubtless accompanied by their attendant insects and parasites. So the Church is more universal still.

Then there are shepherds; again in Luke's account. Shepherds in the Middle East are still mostly children – kids aged between 5 and 11. So the earliest congregation included little children too. And of course they'd have brought their sheep and goats with them. I wonder if Mary and Joseph had trouble keeping the sheep from nibbling at the straw that Jesus was lying on. The goats would have eaten the swaddling clothes as well, given half a chance. And who could ever forget the smell of a billy goat? So there's the inaugural service of the blessing of the animals.

Then there's the star and its attendant Magi. A Magus is a magician; Deut. 18 declares such a person abhorrent. So abhorrent people are there, and Matthew placidly records their coming. How much more broad minded do you want to get!?

Finally, there are angels in their thousands. I think we can safely say they enjoy universal approval. But what a gathering! Parents of dubious status from an even more

questionable pedigree; the animal, vegetable, insect, mineral *and* heavenly kingdoms all represented; and strange foreigners who seek a king – and risk the baby's life by telling Herod about him! That's as broad-minded a church as you could imagine, isn't it. And the infant Jesus is there in the middle of it all; God, unflappably gracious, apparently unfussed by the wild diversity of angels, people and creatures all gathered under one rocky roof. And they were all invited, or else co-opted as hosts. This was no accident.

So *WWJD*? Is what we've imagined so far about God's welcome – about Jesus's inclusivity – consistent with Scripture? The psalm today reminds us of God's special concern for the poor, the needy, the helpless, the oppressed and the violated. The reading from Isaiah joyfully proclaims the gathering in of a scattered family, all guided by the brightness of God's light. And the epistle is a prayer for God's wisdom to be revealed throughout Earth, and indeed beyond it.

That's quite all-inclusive. And Matthew points us in two further directions – one at the beginning and the other at the end of his gospel. Matthew begins his gospel with Jesus's genealogy. He begins that genealogy with Abraham. The most important moment in Abraham's story is when God promises that through him, all families of Earth will be blessed; not only believers; not just all humans; all *families*. The tableau we finally have before us in the crib today shows us this blessing fulfilled.

We find the other direction Matthew points us in right at the end of the gospel. Jesus commits his followers to work to fulfil God's desire – *Go…and make disciples of all nations. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

The tableau before us at Epiphany is a call to us to recognise what God truly desires – universal blessing; grace; peace – a call to recognise God's desire for all to be gathered in the divine presence, and having recognised God's desire, to choose

to work for it with Jesus.

Epiphany calls us to that mission; to invite the world into the presence of Jesus – all families of Earth. He's hardly intimidating.

Epiphany also challenges us to ask how wide we can open *our* stable door; how wide we can open *our* hearts. Epiphany challenges us to open our hearts wider still – to risk what we can't yet cope with. And it also challenges us to go outside; go to the *other* and trust that Jesus goes with us; goes with us to whatever family of Earth he leads us.

Amen