

Feast of the Epiphany 2018

Fr Jarred Mercer

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Epiphany is about our inclusion in joy; our inclusion in God's love. It is a revelation that this gift in Jesus Christ, born into a specific family of a specific tribe of a particular people in a particular place and time, is for all of us. The Magi, the wise men, the kings who come from afar are not of the Hebrew people, know nothing of the scriptures, and are potentially even priests of other religions, or at least sages, philosophers reaching out for hope in the context of another religion, from among another people.

But this is nothing new, really. The prophecy of the star of Judah was in fact given by the pagan

prophet Balaam in the Book of Numbers: ‘A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel’. This us perhaps how the Magi knew the new star they had seen in the sky meant something. This prophecy was well-known, which is also perhaps why Matthew wrote his account with it in mind. They ‘saw the star and rejoiced’, not because they witnessed a scientific marvel, not because they thought they would become legends in the astrology faculty of their university. They rejoiced because they were people of *hope*.

They were waiting in hopeful expectation of what was coming. They were looking, searching, they were filled with a restlessness that could not be satisfied. And then *joy* appeared. Epiphany.

The wise men did not set out on their journey because they saw the star. They saw the star because their journey had already begun. They are

pilgrims, restless and watching and waiting for this great appearing.

But there are, of course, others involved in the story. The Persian scholars are awake and listening, and head the call to follow the star, but the people to whom Jesus came, and the king who reigns over them head nothing and do not move.

In the lights and fog and dust of busy Jerusalem the star is not seen. Herod and those who have bound themselves to him sleep like babies in their contentment—indifferent, apathetic, and dull-hearted.

The Magi set out to Jerusalem to find the one who has been born, only to come to see that those to whom he has been born know nothing of it! Herod is struck with fear, and all Jerusalem with him – including those scholars of the Hebrew scriptures

who are present to answer the questions of these Persian sages, scholars who treat those scriptures like a textbook of answers rather than a light, like a star in the sky, that leads to salvation. And upon hearing the news, which they should have already known about, they remain unmoved.

‘Where is the king who has been born’, the wise men ask, ‘for we have come to worship him’, and rather than joining in worship, joining the journey of the Magi, they stand firm in their resilient, adamant, indifference, and are only moved to fear – not joy – having nailed the colours of their mast to the violent, power-hungry Herod.

Truly the 5.7 mile path from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is in the end much further than the pilgrimage from Persia.

And how this rings true in our own day. Not only do we see at every turn self-professed and so-called Christians turning their allegiance away from Christ's Kingdom to the power-drunk kings of our world.

The kinds of kings who only value 'winners', and scoff and perceived 'losers'; who reign as Herods, stirring up fear and providing false comforts in wealth and prestige and homogenous epidermis – casting out threats to power, Persian pilgrims, and most especially a vulnerable, low-class, immigrant family with an illegitimate child sleeping in a Bethlehem cave. Yes, we see this all around and it is infuriating, not just to those of us who seek to follow Jesus but all those who seek to be human.

And this is what we see here, of course. 'All the high priests and scribes of the people' throwing in

their lot with Herod, sharing his fear, embracing him as king.

But there is a further underlying issue here, and something I think we more readily find in our own lives. Not one of these priests or scribes of the people, or any of the people themselves in Jerusalem unless they were just left out of Matthew's narrative, takes one step towards Bethlehem.

The princes come from afar to worship the new King of Israel, but the people of Israel do not go themselves.

'Where is the Christ to be born', the Magi ask. And the priests and scribes respond immediately, 'Ah, yes, in Bethlehem of Judea, the leader who will shepherd God's people Israel' – and not one of them moves!

The appearing, the revelation, the *Epiphany* of joy – but the monotony of indifference, the apathy of the comfortable, or perhaps the idolatry of false worship of an earthly king, chokes out the fire in their bellies, and they cannot be moved.

We have all, I'm sure, or at least I hope, been in the place of the Magi: searching, waiting, looking for hope and being open enough to the invitation, the inclusion, in Joy, in Love, in Mercy. Open enough to become pilgrims – to set out across deserts to meet and adore the source of the hope we seek.

But how often do we find in ourselves the coldness of these priests and scribes. Perhaps coming here week in and week out, even day in and day out, treating what we hear, or read, or *taste*, as routine consumer goods that sustain our dullness, our lack

of restlessness, our scarcity of openness to God's surprising and shocking and destabilizing love?

We have all certainly been there, in one form or another. Perhaps we're there now. And perhaps this is why we need the reminders each year in our life of both the shepherds and the angels, of Mary and the Holy Spirit, of the Magi and the stable, of Herod and the infants, of the shocking, heart-stopping thrill that *God is in the manger*.

If there is anything that will wake us up, that will awaken within us the restlessness of the Magi, it is this. The God of the universe in the vulnerable, poor frame of a baby – in the boundaries of an infant's body. The kings from a far country bowing before the impoverished child.

This should awaken us. Because we know here that we have met the truest love the world has

ever known. If the almighty God of the universe, the king of all, meets us in this most frail, vulnerable, powerless state of our humanity, there is nowhere and nothing in our lives that is out of reach of God's love. This King, Jesus, is no king like Herod. God's power is not domination it is freedom. God's power is called *mercy*, and it has met us in Jesus Christ.

So we come with the Magi to meet our humble Saviour. As the Magi bow low at the humility of the manger so we fall down in adoration at the anguish of the cross, where Christ's body is broken and his blood poured forth to feed us with the hope of the world.

So come now to the joy that has appeared. From the manger to the altar, in the humility of our Saviour we behold the glory of God.