

Gisborne reflection for 5 January 2020

**Readings:** Matthew 2: 1 – 12 and CH4 328 Wise men, they came to look for wisdom

**Reflection: READY FOR AN EPIPHANY?**

- *A dawning of understanding? The ordinary and extraordinary*
- *God's grace for all [Isaiah 60:6 & Ephesians 3 : 6 and 9 ]*
- *symbolic gifts, light and opposition*
- *wise ones still follow and "dance the way that Jesus taught"*

Today is the first Sunday of our New Year but it is also sometimes called Epiphany Sunday. An Epiphany is a moment when it feels like light is being shone onto something we did not previously understand, a sudden realization, an aha moment, an intuitive new understanding of something that might seem very ordinary on the surface but becomes extraordinary in a new realization. We might call it a dawning of new understanding. An epiphany is like the coming of a brilliant light with the power to transform - a gift from God. On Epiphany Sunday we think particularly about those wise men, led by the light of a star, who came to see Jesus and to worship God, and we rejoice that the light of God is revealed among us in unexpected places and in unexpected people.

The Christmas story reported in Matthew is different from the story in Luke. Luke tells us about humble shepherds. Matthew tells us about a very different group of people. The wise men or magi were influential leaders. They were not kings, although some carols, and retellings of the story, calls them that. They were members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia, in Babylon, who interpreted signs using astrology and astronomy and dreams, and they offered political and military advice to powerful kings. "Wise ones" is a more accurate synonym for the Persian word magi – and they were certainly not Jewish, they were Gentiles. So Herod, king of the Jews, was nervous in their presence. Yet the fact that Matthew, the gospel that emphasises Jewish tradition, tells the story of these Gentiles being important early visitors to Jesus, is very significant.

These wise men had spent many years studying the stars – they were astronomers, astrologers and scholars – educated men revered for their learning and knowledge. So when they discovered the meaning of the star they were watching – that a new king would be born in Judea, they set off to find him. It was a very long journey over difficult country. They were determined however to find and worship the child. They gradually understood more and more about their journey and its destination. The unfolding vision drove them on. They came with a sense of excitement, of wonder and of adoration. They came to meet a wonderful baby through whom the light of God was shining. And when they met him it was an epiphany for them – an aha moment of new and transforming understanding.

Maybe for us to have that aha moment, that instant of new understanding, we too need to make a journey – a metaphorical journey that inspires us to see God in a new way, at the beginning of this new year.

The wise ones delivered their gifts to Jesus, with great joy; gifts that were so symbolic of the life he was to lead. The story of their worship contributed to making believers of all nations, but what does their story mean for us? Why is this story there? What does it mean to you? What is God's message for you today? We may respond to those questions in many different ways.

One of the reasons for the story being there is that it is part of the introduction to Matthew's Gospel, part of the overture that invites us into this story of the life of Jesus. It is part of setting the scene - it states right from the beginning of the gospel, that the God of Israel welcomes those who are not part of Jewish tradition. In Ephesians chapter 3 we also read that the Gentiles have a part with the

Jews in God's blessings. That is us, you and me, not just the wise ones from beyond Judaism. We are all part of God's family. Maybe today there is a new understanding, a revelation for you that God's love is for all – we do not have to come from a particular group or background. God's love is for everyone. God loves you.

The second reason for the story is seen in the gifts the wise ones brought to Jesus. They are a foreshadowing of some of the things that Jesus stood for, so again a setting of the scene and an overture to his life – gold, a gift fit for a king; frankincense, from ancient times has been seen as a symbol for deity, for God – it is actually a kind of resin or gum from a tree – apparently it has a very bitter taste, although I have not tried to taste it myself, yet when it is burnt, it burns with a steady flame for a long time and has a delightful fragrance; and myrrh is also an aromatic resin with two particular uses - it is one of the ingredients in anointing oil and so symbolises holiness and sacredness or being set apart for a special role but it is also used for embalming bodies and would have been amongst what were described as 'spices' that the women prepared to embalm the body of Jesus.

The life of Jesus as explained in Matthew's Gospel does tell of his kingship, deity and being set apart for a special role. Maybe those gifts and their meaning form a revelation, an epiphany, a new understanding for you today?

We can be transformed by the things revealed to us by the light of God - open to the joy of the world around us and responsive to awe and wonder. Light is also one of the images in this overture to the gospel – the light from a star – we might see light as the third aspect of this overture that introduces us to the themes of the gospel.

The theme of light is echoed in the letter to the Ephesians - there are many words that shine light for us, illuminate, reveal, and open our understanding to the way that God's grace and love works in us. God's grace is not a neat tidy little package that we can explain in words – it is part of the great mystery of God – so much greater than our understanding but can certainly be a very real part of our experience.

A fourth aspect of the story of the wise men that is part of the introduction to the gospel and the overture to Jesus' life is the involvement of Herod. Herod was the puppet king of this outpost of the Roman Empire. He was kept in place by the favour of the Roman Emperor – but in return he was expected to keep his people, the Jews, in order, make sure they paid their taxes to the Romans, and advise the Romans of any potential hotspots or difficult people who needed controlling. Herod is introduced to us in this nativity story, this overture to the gospel, as a man who is very scared of others taking his authority, scared but violent and prepared to do anything to ensure that his power remains. He also tells his own version of truth – like asking the wise men to come back and tell him where the child they were seeking was, because he wanted to go and worship him too – when worship was far from his intention.

All through the story of the life of Jesus we find Herod in the background – not always the same Herod but the descendants of the one we meet in Matthew chapter 2 were also very protective of their own power and authority. Herod represents the opposition Jesus would face.

Jesus came into this world to bring light into darkness, to be light and to encourage his followers to be shining lights for others too. If we catch the vision of Jesus, we will see the world with new understanding – open to awe and wonder and willing to trust.

If we are wise we will follow the light of God in our lives, like those wise men followed the star. Will you put God at the centre of your life for 2020? God can bring the fragments of our vision

into a new understanding - if we are open to the wonder of God in all aspects of our lives - and to seeing God in others too.

May you be transformed by God's love so that you may share God's vision and bring light into the lives of others. Be wise and keep following the way of Jesus, but also be aware of God's grace active in those around you. Be prepared to recognise the light of God in others.

May you live the Way of Jesus in 2020, with God at the centre of your life. May you help to bring in God's new world. God bless you. Amen.

**Our response to God in an affirmation of faith:**

Bill Wallace, a New Zealand Methodist Minister and hymn writer, has been inspired to write these words about what happens when we allow God to be in the centre of our lives and to see God's grace working in each person.

**When the child is at the centre** - words: Bill Wallace

When the child is at the centre, when the babe is in the stall,  
When the adult nurtures wonder, when the carols warm us all,  
**Then the fragments come together and the vision shines as one  
In each particle of being, in each daughter and each son.**

When the angels come as people, when the wise ones dwell inside,  
When the shepherds are the workers, when the babe our inner guide,  
**Then our Christmas comes each moment that our minds perceive God's grace,  
every time our hearts are opened, we see Christ within each face.**

Sing and dance the Christmas story, celebrate the Child's great feast,  
Be the festive wine and dancing, be the joy that grows like yeast,  
**Fill the heart with thankful praises, clear the mind of dismal thought,  
Celebrate the Christmas wisdom, dance the Way that Jesus taught.**