

“Wisdom meets Wisdom”
The Epiphany of Our Lord
7 January 2024
Trinity+St.Peter’s Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-4
Saint Matthew 2:1-12

INI

The Coming Ones

In the first reading for today, from Isaiah, there is an image that might not be immediately seen by us. “Arise, shine, for your light has come,” says the prophet, and in those words picture Judah as a woman standing on a mountain, her face and image glorified and enlightened by the golden rays of the rising sun. She is the first of many who will be drawn to the light – others will be called. I am especially mindful of this meaning when reading this passage because my daughter was baptized on Epiphany of 1976. Thus when the prophet writes, “Your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. The nations will come with many gifts, the abundance of the sea, the wealth of nations, gold, and frankincense. Thus in this reading from third Isaiah we can see themes that Matthew will mine in his birth narrative, and we can see the invitation to more than Judah to honor the gift that God gives to not only Israel, but to the entire world as well.

The magi, the wise ones mentioned in the second chapter of Matthew represented the peoples of Persia, where the magi were advisors to the king. The role that Persia played over against Israel was intense when we realize that Cyrus the Great allowed the people of Israel and Judah to return to their native lands. The wise ones also represent the keen influence that Persian thought had on late Jewish thought. We shall talk about this a little later in this sermon. What is stunning is that in Matthew many peoples are called to come and worship the Christ child. Some were former enemies, some were called to honor the God of Israel, some were from all the nations that ringed the Mediterranean.

In Advent we anticipate Jesus as the “Coming One”, the one who will come again to visit us with grace and forgiveness. The Evangelists, especially Matthew and Luke call us to anticipate the Coming One not only with Israel, but with other nations as well. The psalm for today puts it well, “All kings shall bow down before him, and all the nations do him service.” However, it is not only the high and mighty who have been invited, but the poor and lowly as well. Again, from today’s psalm, “He shall have pity on the lowly and poor, he shall preserve the lives of the needy. He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, and dear shall their blood be in his sight.” Thus, we are called, and the ancient prophets announced to us, that to worship the Christ child is

to be called to serve all those around us as well – bringing them the gifts of life and redemption.

Coming to the King

There is another theme in this reading from Matthew. It is a theme that runs throughout the entirety of Matthew's Gospel. It is the theme that Jesus is not only from David's line, but that Jesus, like David, exercises a kingship not only in Israel, but in the whole world. There are nuances throughout the gospel that speed to this relationship: the star which in ancient times often signaled the birth of a prince or ruler. There is the prophet Balaam who bidden by his king to curse Israel, is convinced to do the exact opposite. Instead of curses he utters blessings upon Israel. He prophesies about a great star that will accompany the birth of a great king (read David) who would lead Israel. An ancillary theme is the one of light, the light that is the star, and the notion that Jesus is the Light of the world.

The wise ones come to various kings. They inquire of Herod about the child. But their real intent is to honor the king that is the son of Mary. They treat him like a king, prostrating themselves before him and offering him kingly gifts. The reality of Jesus' life amongst us is the exact opposite: poverty, life in the wilderness, the rejection by many, especially those who were political and religious leaders. There is the irony of the statement that Pilate has nailed to the cross that bears Jesus. Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum – Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. I remember when the three-year lectionary first came out, when I was stunned at one of the Gospel readings for Christ the King Sunday – it was Jesus on the cross – ruling from the cross. That is the king that the wise ones came to worship.

Wisdom meets Wisdom

Finally, there is a theme in this story that represents a dialogue. In the city of Constantinople, now Istanbul, there is a great mosque – a former church, a cathedral for the Patriarch of Constantinople. It is called Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom. The wisdom intended in the name of this great church, is not limited to the image of wisdom in the Old Testament, but rather Jesus as that Wisdom – the Word made flesh.

Matthew has wisdom come to greet and honor Wisdom. In my studies of Mesopotamian and Egyptian philosophy I have encountered a great deal of wisdom that influenced the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures. There are even stories about them: Joseph the Seer and ruler in Egypt (who incidently serves as a model in Matthew's birth narrative), Balaam the Moabite prophet, Daniel the wise one who was taken off to Babylon and who interpret dreams and shares wisdom with the king, and Deborah the judge who shares wisdom with Israel. These models of wisdom and summed up in Matthew in the persons of the Magi who come to worship Jesus. Their wisdom leads them to Bethlehem, and to seek out Wisdom there.

Once, having purchased a book of physics by Heinz Pagels (The Cosmic Code, a Primer on Quantum Physics, the physicist husband of Elaine Pagels, the scriptural scholar, I read a phrase in which Heinz Pagels says that in describing the oddities of quantum physics one must often resort to "religious language". And here we greet the wisdom of

creation that is being revealed to us by modern science, and that is modeled to us in the ministry of Jesus. Epiphany means “made manifest.” What has become real to us in our lifetimes? What has become real to us in our morning newspaper? What has become manifest to us as we observe the lives of others who share our communities and our society. What is the wisdom that is renewed to us every day? Jesus can lead us into wisdom and into service. Dean Alan Jones, former dean at Grace Cathedral advises us in his book Common Prayer on Common Ground, *Anglican orthodoxy begins and ends in prayer, in silence before the mystery. It is not anti-intellectual but insists on the joining of intellect with emotion, of praying, as the Eastern tradition has it, with the mind in the heart.* So let us seek out wisdom and mystery like the Magi did, and let us share it with all people. Wisdom will lead us to the Wisdom – Jesus!

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