



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Wise Men Seek First His Kingdom

Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany 8th January 2023

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Last Wednesday was Twelfth Night, the last day of the Christmas season. Thus, Thursday was the feast of Epiphany and the start of the season of Epiphany. The word Epiphany is borrowed from Greek and simply means revelation, manifestation, showing. It is the Church season when we recall the revelation of Christ to the covenant people of God, the Jews and to the rest of humanity, us Gentiles.

Over Christmas, we heard of the shepherds being told of the birth of Christ by the angel. They were told who he was (the saviour, the Christ, the Lord) and where he was: in Bethlehem, the town of David; they were told how they would recognise him: a new-born baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

This was the first announcement to Jews that the Messiah had arrived. Remember, Messiah is the Hebrew word for anointed as Christ is the Greek word meaning the same. The title Messiah was to do with royalty. The Jews were promised a descendant of King David who would rule them with righteousness. Yet, even at this preliminary announcement, they were told more of who he was – not just a king but the Saviour. Not only a saviour but God himself – for that is how the word Lord was used.

Today we are observing Epiphany which celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the world. The Magi are the first non-Jews to come to see Jesus. They were highly regarded wisemen and astrologers of the Babylonian court. In his day, around 500B.C., Daniel was elevated to the chief of the Magi due to his inspired wisdom and interpretation.

Whatever the star was, they interpreted it to mean that a king was born in Judah. And so they took action - they thought it was important to go and visit. But they didn't only visit and give courtesy gifts, they worshipped! This is remarkable. They came announcing that intention: "We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When they found the holy family, "they bowed down and worshipped him."

Why would these Babylonians want to worship a Jewish baby king? Maybe Daniel's teachings and indeed his prophecies of the Messiah to come had been kept in their records and they understood more than the Jewish teachers of that day? They surely did not do the same for every prince born in surrounding countries. But then, they did not see signs in the sky pointing out those other princes.

Paul writes in his epistle to the Ephesians of his commission to make Christ known to the gentile nations. He makes four points:

1. His message was made known to him by revelation (v3).
2. That in Christ and through faith in him, we can approach God with freedom and confidence. (v12).

3. Gentiles are made heirs with Israel, brought into the one body and all share in the promise of Christ Jesus. (v6)
4. God intends to make his wisdom known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the church (v10-11).

In a sense, the Magi are a model of this. They received revelation. They freely approached Christ in confidence. They were Gentiles being drawn to the people of God through Christ. The wisdom of God was on display to the wise men of the world.

1. Paul's message was made known to him by revelation.

The insight that Paul shows is far beyond what could be deduced from the gospel accounts. It is Paul who opens up to us salvation by faith. It is Paul who grasped the importance of the inclusion of the Gentiles. It is Paul who has such a high view of the Church and its cosmic significance as is shown at the beginning of this letter. Such insight could only come by Holy Spirit revelation.

It is similar to Peter's insight that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God which, Jesus said, was given to him by revelation and not deduced or learnt from men. So too, John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God, it was by revelation not from discussion with Jesus or some other source. John said God told him how to identify the Messiah.

It seems to me that the Magi had some degree of revelation as well. Their desire to worship and the great joy they experienced when they found Bethlehem are not the stuff of dry academia or courtly behaviour.

I was intrigued to discover this week something in what the Angel Gabriel said when he told Mary that she would carry the Messiah. To give you the context: He informed her that her relative, Elizabeth, was six months pregnant. You will remember that she was elderly and had been barren. Gabriel had spoken to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, in the temple and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son, John, who would prepare the way for the Lord. That seemed impossible to Zechariah.

When Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant, he said, "For nothing is impossible with God."¹ What I found was that the Greek literally says, "For every word of God will not be impossible." In other words, when God says something it will happen. He had said Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a child in their old age and now Elizabeth was pregnant.

I mention this because it is important in terms of revelations from God. If he has promised something to you, he will do what he said. So, what do we do with revelations we receive? They won't be of such an import as those just mentioned, but if God speaks to us in some way, it is important. When the Creator of the universe speaks, worlds are created. When the Lover of our souls speaks, our lives are transformed – if they are fertile soil for the word to take root and grow. Friends, let us keep alert for ways God may speak to us in our daily lives and then be ready to respond and obey.

2. We may approach God with boldness and in confidence

Ephesians 3:12 "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

We have great privilege in Christ. Paul tells us again here, that we have free access to the Father through Him.

How wonderful that we know can have confidence to come into the presence of God because Jesus has cleansed us from our sins. We can come with boldness because in Him we are adopted heirs of God.

Do you have that confidence? Do you know you are forgiven? It is important. If not, don't be content until you have resolved the issue. I preached on this once and afterwards someone came to see me who had been troubled by guilt for decades. After confession and prayer, that one came into assurance of forgiveness and knew a lightness of spirit for the first time. Why endure decades of misery and heaviness when the assurance of forgiveness and salvation is available to you now? Why live as if God were angry with you when you can

¹ Luke 1:37

know him as loving Father who delights in you? If you are struggling – please see me, Helen, Anne, Lorraine, Peter, Trevor or another you trust who can bring you to that glorious freedom and joy.

3. Gentiles are included into the Body of God's people

Paul makes the point that Gentiles believers are fully included with Jewish believers into God's people the Church. Christ was revealed to the Magi. As we move into the history of the early church, we see God acting sovereignly to draw Gentiles to faith and arrange for the gospel to be explained to them. Think of Philip preaching to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Think of Cornelius the Centurion who was visited by an angel and told to send for Peter. The gospel was not to be limited to the Jews but is for all nations.

All of us come needy and lost, to be saved and redeemed by our wonderful saviour, Jesus. It is that imperative that drove the missionary movement of the 19th Century. It was dangerous to travel to the other side of the world in those days - the first missionaries to West Africa had a life expectancy of two weeks when they landed due to disease. They went with their possessions packed in a coffin. Why? – because this message of salvation is so important.

As a parish we have been given a particular connection with Kondoa Diocese – it was unexpected but it has been fruitful. Remember that district of Tanzania had been neglected as far as gospel outreach is concerned until 1990. I regard Given Gaula as the Apostle of Kondoa. Under his leadership, they are reaching villages which have never heard the gospel. On our last trip in 2018, we had the privilege of preaching in two villages where the gospel was first preached earlier that same year! We need to be faithful to the calling we have there. Thank you for what you have given and done to support the spread of the gospel in that part of the world. They rejoice because they know what they have been set free from. When spiritual darkness is great, the light of Christ shines and brings truth, forgiveness, freedom, relationship with God, direction and purpose. They rejoice in that light. And so do we!

Speaking of our support for Kondoa, so far we have sent \$3500 to buy food for the hungry. Bishop Given texted me on Christmas Day saying:

Hello Ian and Helen and all the saints at St Stephen's (that's you!) We wish you a Happy Christmas and may he be born again in a new flesh in your hearts. By the way, thank you very much for giving my people a happy Christmas by feeding them. Today after the service, one old lady came to me thanking God that without helping her with food she would not come even to church. Now she is celebrating Christmas with food under her feet. We highly appreciate your support which came on time to give the poorest people the real meaning of Christmas to bring joy to all people. If people such as this lady would not have something to eat in this important day it will not mean anything to her. Thank you, St Stephen's for giving us good news.

We also received an appeal from Kondoa for help roofing a new church in the village of Amani. They have built the walls but cannot afford the roof. Vestry decided that since the Op Shop had done exceptionally well last year, we could resume our previous giving which has helped about 18 villages roof their new churches. Vestry approved a donation of a further \$3500 for that project.

How important is it to you that others are told of Jesus? It is not just overseas, most Kiwis have no idea about the gospel. Most seem to think our message is that you must be good to go to church which is a hypocritical holiness club. How important is it that ignorant, secular kiwis know about Jesus? We can't reach everyone – that is impossible. But God will give us opportunities to connect with some people. Who might that be for you?

It has been a joy on the last Alpha course to see two people come into relationship with Jesus and several others strengthened and deepened in their faith. This is part of our parish response to the command to make disciples. Some of us are frontline, some help with food, some pray, some help with the costs – it is a team effort. Thank you for your part in that!

4. God will reveal his wisdom through the Church

Paul tells us that the Church has an astonishing role. We are not just to tell humans about Christ's redemption we are a display of God's wisdom to the heavenly powers! What an awesome commission. Paul specifically says to heavenly powers.

Now I don't think we have to do anything overt like proclaiming to the archangels. But maybe our response to God's grace and the change it brings in our lives, is the testimony. Maybe the way the gospel brings together Jew and Gentile and different races is the testimony of God's wisdom. So we don't want to spoil that testimony whether to humans or angels. Maybe far more hangs on our actions, our behaviour, our faith than we had realised? I hope you never has thought of the church as a club of likeminded believers. The Church, as revealed to Paul, has eternal, cosmic significance. It is far more than we see or dimly understand.

Today we celebrate Epiphany – the manifestation of Christ. It is the continuing task of the Church to manifest Christ, to show him to the world and as we have learnt also to heavenly powers.

Can we learn from the Magi? Can we follow the light we have as we are led to Christ and bring him our best we have as our offering? May the light of Christ shine on and through us to the glory of God. Amen.