

## Sermon

### ***The Hopes and Fears of all the Years are met in thee***

**Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12**

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It is a new year – 2021 is over. Has it been a year of fear, frustration or financial worry? Has it been one of faith, challenge and provision? What have been your fears? What have been your hopes? Maybe it has been a mixture of fear and faith, frustration and challenge, financial worry with provision? I am reminded of the line of the carol: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

We celebrate Epiphany today. Epiphany means revelation. Especially revelation of God to people. In the birth of that child in the small town of Bethlehem there is the greatest wonder of this world's history. There was born a unique child, brought into being miraculously by divine action in the womb of a virgin girl. This was the one long hoped for. At the same time, this babe was feared by Herod as a threat to his power.

Many devout Jews longed for the day that the Anointed One would come. They expected a descendent of King David who would deliver them from their enemies. What was given was so very much more than they had understood.

Do you remember Gabriel's words in speaking to Zechariah?

**Luke 1:19** "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."

Who can stand in the presence of God? The Bible describes the throne room of heaven. God is enthroned with twenty-four elders seated around him. Around the throne are four living creatures each with six wings. They constantly worship God and when they worship the elders fall down and worship too.

Do you hear how overwhelmingly awesome the presence of God is? These preeminent creatures worship continually. Gabriel is of such rank that he is able to stand in the presence of God. His words carry great weight. Now he spoke to Mary of the child she would carry:

**Luke 1:32-35** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." <sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

Twice Gabriel said the child would be called the Son of God: the Son of the Most High and the Son of God. Her child would be the Holy One (that is another title of God). His kingdom would be everlasting.

In the babe of Bethlehem, God took on a human body. It is the most amazing, wonderful, awesome event ever. And yet, here glory was dressed in humility. Not for him the pomp of a royal palace but the simplicity of a common house with the domestic animals. There was one instance of glory leakage – an outburst of angelic rejoicing, but that was only seen by shepherds out on the hills keeping their sheep.

But God was drawing others to offer their worship. Far, far away in another kingdom to the East, some star-gazing learned men saw signs in the night sky. Through their interpretative lens, they understood those signs to mean that a king was born in Israel.

They journeyed long and far to visit and honour this new king. Their arrival in Jerusalem caused quite a stir not just with Herod but all of the people of Jerusalem. Matthew does not say how many they were – the number three is probably only connected to the three gifts. It is highly unlikely that Court officers would travel to another country alone – they would have had a reasonably sized party to serve them and to guard them on the journey. Estimates suggest it could easily have been 100-300 people. A foreign expedition arriving with armed guards would cause consternation. To have those foreigners ask about the new born King of Jews would certainly set the tongues aflame!

Our readings start with one of the Old Testament prophecies which points to this event. Isaiah had written of the light of Israel coming and the glory of Yahweh rising upon them. In the middle of great darkness Yahweh himself would rise upon them and his glory would appear. What could this mean? Later Jesus would claim that title of being the Light of the World and who else could be the glory of Yahweh appearing over the people of Israel than the incarnate Son of God?

I remember a conversation I had with the brother of a friend when I was a relatively new Christian. He suddenly said, “You don’t really believe Jesus was God do you?” It was a pivotal challenge. There was a sense of intellectual scorn waiting to fall upon me. I considered for a moment and said, “Yes, that is exactly what I believe.” This is the point of the Epiphany. God has become a man and lived a life at a particular place and time. It is a great wonder. The light of God has risen, the revelation of God has shone forth, the glory of the Lord has been seen in Jesus.

Isaiah continues by saying, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”<sup>1</sup> Nations is *goyim*, gentile nations. Isaiah prophesies that the gentiles will come to the light of Christ and kings to the brightness of his dawn or shining.

You can see how relevant this prophecy is to the coming of the Magi. Their coming to find the Christ-child was the first fulfilment of this prophecy. The spread of the gospel across the world is the greater fulfillment.

Isaiah continues saying that people will come from Sheba carrying gifts of gold and frankincense. Sheba is modern day Yemen – currently racked by civil war. In ancient times, it was famous for possessing great wealth - gold, jewels and spices. Spices don't seem very precious to us, but in ancient times, some spices and aromatic oils were worth more than their weight in diamonds because of their rarity and use in perfumes, incense and medicine.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 60:3

## ***What did the Magi do?***

What did the Magi do and can we learn from their example?

### **They were committed**

They were committed to the revelation they had received. Historical records indicate that there was a growing expectation in the East that a world leader was about to be born. These men, having discerned that the King of the Jews had been born, travelled far to visit – possibly for four months. Such a trip would be expensive in money and time – it is a real commitment. They said that they saw his star in the East. We could infer that they were no longer seeing it, both from the verb tense and their later joy at seeing the star again. Four or more months is a long time to travel without reassurance and confirmation.

How committed are we to seek the Lord? When we have some insight or revelation, are we prepared to pray, study, spend money, travel, to put ourselves out to pursue what God is showing us?

The star sighting only directed them to Israel. So they went to the logical place: the capital and to the palace. For Herod, paranoid at the best of times, it was very threatening. So he called the religious advisors to ask where the Messiah would be born and they correctly interpret scripture to point to Bethlehem.

But why didn't the religious leaders go to see what the Magi might find? Where was their curiosity, their zeal? They knew where the Messiah was to be born but when foreigners came saying it had happened they just pointed the way and ignored the matter! It is something I see today as well, people ignore the work of God right alongside and can't be bothered to have a look. Let us not be in that category!

### **They came to worship**

They came intending to honour or worship the baby. These are high officials were intent on honouring the royal baby of another country. The word used, *proskyneo*, means to prostrate oneself in worship. When we seek the Lord, do we come to worship him? That is the right motivation – not intellectual interest but a desire to seek the Lord of Lords and worship him.

### **They rejoiced**

When the Magi were sent off by Herod to find the child, they saw the star again. And (literally) they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy! Yes, it is great to be reassured that you are still on the right track. But this joy was enormous – have you ever seen someone rejoice exceedingly with great joy?

When we seek the Lord, when we have revelations or encouragements, when we see answers to prayer and healings - there is joy. Joy is good. I am amazed that the Magi who were court officials were able to release themselves into exceedingly great joy. We are often too straight-jacketed to be real.

### **They humbled themselves**

When the Magi came to the house, they worshipped. And Matthew tells us they fell down and also they prostrated themselves and worshipped. Who would have seen it and told Matthew about this? Mary! I think she was saying, "I mean they really did lie face down and worship." Here were principal men of another nation humbling themselves in the dust before a baby in a small house in a small town.

Do we humble ourselves before the Lord? They must have been convinced of his greatness even though they didn't understand it fully. Are we convinced?

## **They gave gifts**

Then they gave to the baby their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. You know the usual associations that these were gold for a king, frankincense which was used in worship for a god and myrrh which was used for embalming as an indication of the death he would suffer.

I think we could relate those gifts to what we may be called upon to give.

**Gold:** obviously our monetary giving. Are we giving what he calls us to give? I have told you before that the Biblical norm for our giving is a tithe. That is a tenth of our income. And yes it is seen in the New Testament. Jesus is the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek who received tithes from Abraham. Does our giving honour the Lord or are we merely giving a small tip? Have you seriously considered tithing? My experience is that when you do, somehow the Lord provides and you don't go short.

**Frankincense:** This spice was used for incense in worship and in scripture represents the prayers and worship of the saints. Are you giving him worship? Are you praying - not just asking for things but expressing your praise, loving him and listening to him?

**Myrrh** was used for embalming. It speaks of sacrifice. What does our worship cost us? Are we prepared to share in the sufferings of Jesus. That does not mean being crucified but the work of the Kingdom and the extension of the Kingdom requires sacrifices to be made. This is an offering – are you ready to make it too?

## ***Epiphany – Christ to all the Nations***

The point of Epiphany is that Christ is made known not just to the Jews, but to all the nations. That was the special focus of Paul's ministry to take the gospel to other nations, to tell them - to tell us - that in Christ we may approach God with freedom and confidence – that is good news!

That is still the need in this day. We need to be assured of our position in Christ. Then we need to be telling others. There are so many in our own country who do not know or understand; there are so many in other parts of the world who need to know of Jesus and his great rescue; who need to hear the good news of repentance and forgiveness in His name.

## **Kondoa Testimony**

As you know we support the work of Kondoa Diocese. Yesterday, I had an email from Bishop Given. You may remember they are building a cathedral. Amazingly, Kondoa was chosen to host the National Christmas Eve service which was broadcast on TV. So with the roof barely on and the building not finished they did it! Here are some excerpts, a full copy is on the Missions noticeboard.

Here in Kondoa we enter the New Year with a great thankful heart for what God has done in this historical year. 2021 will be remembered forever in this Diocese!

[Firstly for the] ... big outreach that has turned upside down the Diocese. So many people have come to faith more than any other time. ...

He looks back at the growth over the last nine years writing:

Lilian and I see God's purpose for us to be in Kondoa at this very time. From around 7000 Christians to 25000 it must be God! From 77 congregations to 125, from 21 priests to 67 priests, from 77 Catechists/evangelists to 127 Catechists/evangelists! It is a sign of growth. We did not have a priest with a degree now we have three and one in progress! And we have six diplomas and about 57% now have attended Biblical Studies so that they can preach and teach the word of God effectively!

On a personal level the dearest people of KIWI land have supported the bishop and his family so that he is able to serve God and extend his kingdom in Kondoa by getting food on the table! I do not have enough language to give you, only God will reward you! Thank you very much for sharing the gospel with us in this way! Indeed without your support it would have been impossible for us to serve God in this missionary diocese in Tanzania! God brought to us the good people of KIWI land at the right time for us just after being called to the work of the Bishop in Kondoa! Thank you so much Pastor Ian, and Andrew for God using you to bring such good people into our lives! History will tell! It is my prayer every day that our friendship with the good people of the St Stephen Whangapharoa and Anglican Community Rangiora will continue to grow from strength to strength! For nine years we have received your support.

Secondly, God has blessed us with a Cathedral, after worshiping in a small Chapel many years we now have a Church building in the Town of Kondoa. Many Christians from various denominations in Kondoa have told me that the Cathedral of St Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles (note the name!) stands as a witness of Christian presence in Kondoa. It is a big mark of our Christianity in the town of Kondoa. It was great to hold the national Service of Christmas Eve this year.

Isaiah wrote, "Nations will come to your light." St Paul wrote of the revelation of Christ to the gentiles. Here is a part of that great work being played out before our eyes.

Their attitude is a real challenge to us. Look what they have achieved in 9 years and in the last year in spite of the pandemic. What are your fears -- most of them won't happen anyway - give them to Jesus. More importantly what are your hopes? - trust him to oversee your life. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."