

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Epiphany, year 'C'
6 January, 2010
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It seems fairly certain that the Magi were what we would today call astrologers. Their ilk were well-known in the ancient world and it is not at all improbable that they would have travelled west from places like Babylon. They would have found welcoming audiences everywhere from market places to royal courts. We know that kings and those in high places of authority regularly consulted magi and so Herod's eagerness to meet with them and to hear their divinations is not only completely in keeping with the character of this odious figure but is also in accord with the known practices of the time.

Thus, though these magi have become for us figures of high and ceaseless romance, and though Christianity has from the earliest days made them into three kings who came to represent both all of the world's races and each stage of the human life span from youth to old age, they are also real figures from history who disclose to us something of the age in which they lived.

It was an age perhaps not unlike our own: an age of turmoil and war; an age of great wealth and grinding poverty; an age in which people despaired of the present and hoped for the future. People then, as now, had ceased to worship the true God – for he seemed so powerfully silent – and had turned to idols. They looked, as do we, to anyone who seemed to have the mysterious and troubling power of reading the stars and telling forth the future. And they were, as are we, restless both within themselves and without; they were in many ways nomads. Thus these magi, these kings, these astrologers – call them what you will – are, in fact, in many ways representatives of their time. Their great wealth, their search for answers among the stars, their restlessness is, for us who hear their story down through the long millennia, a kind of epiphany: a disclosure, a manifestation and a revelation. But their encounter with the Christ child reveals to us a deeper epiphany: the truth of who he is.

So not only does this story of the magi disclose to us the truth of the age in which they lived, it also discloses to us the truth of our own age. Moreover, the story of these wise men is also, like all stories in scripture, our story. We are their successors in the great drama of human existence: the drama of the search for meaning. And God, disclosed – revealed – to the whole world in the incarnate man Jesus Christ *is* the meaning.

The American preacher and novelist Frederick Buechner once preached three short Christmas homilies, which were cast in the form of monologues for three different minor characters: the innkeeper, the shepherd, and a wise man. That wise man, in his short monologue, says this:

“But why did we go? I could not tell you now, and I could not have told you then, nor even as we were in the process of going. Not that we had no motive, but that

we had so many. Curiosity, I suppose: to be wise is to be eternally curious, and we were very wise. We wanted to see for ourselves this One before whom even the stars are said to bow down – to see perhaps if it was really true because even the wise have their doubts. And longing. Longing. Why will a man who is dying of thirst crawl miles across sands as hot as fire at simply the possibility of water? But if we longed to receive, we longed also to give. Why will a man labour and struggle all the days of his life so that in the end he has something to give the one he loves?

“So finally we got to the place where the star pointed us...We did not stay long...We set our foolish gifts down on the straw and left.”

You and I have journeyed here this evening from many different places, and I speak not only – or even – of the physical places from which we’ve come. And we have come full of curiosity and doubt, across ways as bleak and unforgiving as the desert, athirst for truth and dying to receive and to give. We have journeyed here because we know that here in this place, right now, that after which we seek will be disclosed. We have come, as did the wise men, not knowing why we were making the journey, perhaps feeling even a little foolish for doing so, and we have, God only knows, been more than a little distracted along the way. But no matter: here we are.

But having come this far, do we have wisdom enough to see into the heart of the matter? Is there an Epiphany here for you and me? With the eyes of the flesh it is, of course, impossible to see clearly. But with the eyes of faith – the eyes those magi of old had – we are able to do so. How, you might, ask, does one acquire such vision? Through grace: the grace of the sacraments, the transforming power of which is bodied forth in the faith and worship of the redeemed community. With the eyes of faith we see that Christ is incarnate in the unlikeliest of people – even in you and me. We see that he offers the only gift which is worth getting – the peace which passes understanding. We see in the light of his truth that all of our preoccupations and preconceptions are as flimsy shams.

Yes, we see all that; we know it. And these are no small epiphanies. But what, we may still wonder, *is* the heart of the matter? We know what it is, you and I, but the contemplation of it is grave and we turn away. It is the deepest truth, the wisdom and the mystery hidden for ages in God which in Christ is disclosed once for all: that to live without him is the real death and that to die with him is the only life.