

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 5th January 2025, Epiphany

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Matthew 2:1-12

This weekend we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, think about some popular Christmas card images, and acknowledge some contemporary implications from this last part of the Christmas story.

Christmas card designs often suggest that there were three kings, riding camels to a stable, to present symbolic gifts to the baby Jesus. In nativity plays the stable is quite crowded with an unspecified number of animals and shepherds, being joined by three kings. I have not mentioned the little drummer boy because... that is whimsy!

In the Gospel of Matthew there is no stable or shepherds, for they are only mentioned in Luke's Gospel. In Matthew there are an unspecified number of wise men - with no mention of them being kings, and no mention of them riding camels! It's very unlikely that they were kings or else they would have had a retinue, and the Roman authorities would have engaged with them differently!

Were there two wise men, or were there seven? We don't know! However, three is a familiar number potentially influenced by the number of heavenly visitors to Abram in the Old Testament Book of Genesis who prophesied that his wife Sarah would have a baby? (*Genesis 18:1-16*)

Matthew's Gospel tells us that the visitors were wise, and they came from '*the East*.' I think it's fair to think of them as early astronomers, because they were familiar enough with the stars to recognise variations and movement in the night sky. They were also familiar with prophetic writing in a religion that was not their own. Coming from '*the East*' we can imagine them coming from the land area we now call Iraq and Iran. Babylon, in modern day Iraq, had been the capital of the Babylonian Empire (559-331BCE), and Persepolis, in modern day Iran, had been the capital of the Persian Empire (626-536BCE).

It is in Luke's Gospel we find a recurring theme of Jesus being Good News for both Jews and Gentiles – while Matthew's Gospel predominantly speaks of the Kingdom of God as Good News for the Jews. However, the '*Good News for all*' message seems to have leaked into Matthew's narrative in this Epiphany reading for we hear about some wise, non-Jewish men... coming to acknowledge the baby Jesus, as the promised Messiah and King.

As we remember the wisdom of those men and where it had led them, we might ask ourselves how we can seek to grow in wisdom this year. Those men were familiar with

their own religious faith, which was probably Zoroastrianism, as well as the prophetic writing of Judaism. So, how familiar are we with the sacred writing of our Christian faith – both Old and New Testaments? Further, how could we increase that familiarity and deepen our understanding over the next twelve months? At the least I suggest we each commit to a weekly Bible study of some sort during the six weeks of Lent (March-April 2025) – but, there are some great resources available to help us grow through a small amount of Bible reading and reflection each day. **Please get in touch with me if you'd like some recommendations.**

It seems that the wise men were also open to the ways that science could help them understand things – for they studied astronomy. So... what area of science excites you and causes you to wonder? I remember attending a lecture given by the English theoretical physicist, Professor John Polkinghorne, who explained that though he was originally an atheist, the more he studied sub-atomic physics the more he was drawn to the conclusion that there had to be a God. So, again – what area of science excites you and me, and causes us to wonder – and how might that inform our lives of faith? Personally, I love biology – particularly, the interdependence of flora and fauna within ecosystems – and particularly... the role of trees in this.

The wise men apparently went to Jerusalem and did something that was politically naïve. They asked the Jewish King Herod, where they could find the much longed for Jewish King who had been promised for centuries. Herod feigned interest and asked the wise men to let him know exactly where this new king could be found, so he could go and acknowledge him. However, today's Gospel finishes before things get tragic! We are told that *'having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men left for their own country by another road.'*

If we kept on reading today's Gospel, and I think we need to in the midst today's global refugee reality; if we kept on reading we would read about Joseph being warned in a dream to take his family and *'flee to Egypt, and remain there until it was safe to return.'* We would also read about Herod being so infuriated that the wise men had not told him about the identity of the new king that he sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem who were younger than two.

So... Joseph, Mary, and Jesus spent some years in Egypt as refugees, unable to return to Nazareth because of a ruler that would tolerate no rivals. In my imagination I think the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh would have been useful in those years of exile. They could have paid for carpentry tools so that Joseph was able to work his trade to pay for shelter, food, and bribes. We are not told about angels looking after the family in Egypt, so presumably Joseph and Mary used their wits and abilities to learn a new language, find work, and make a life... until the old tyrant, Herod, died... and they were able to return to Israel.

We live in a time when there is an unprecedented number of refugees in our world – and according to current UNHCR data sixty-five per cent of these come from just four countries: 6.3 million people from Syria; 6.2 million people from Venezuela; 6.1 million people from Ukraine; and 6.1 million people from Afghanistan.

In addition, the UNHCR estimated two months ago that nearly three million people have fled to neighboring countries from the conflict in Sudan which began in April 2023.

While in the Gaza Strip 1.4 million people are now registered as refugees out of a population of 1.9 million!

So... as we remember Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fleeing the country of their birth this week, and the hospitality that must have been afforded them in Egypt – can we also remember the millions who currently live in our world as refugees?

Can we pray for God's blessing upon them, and upon those who provide support – and be open to the possibility of offering our own support and friendship... for, surely, we are all God's children?

Please join me as I close in prayer...

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and for your love. We give thanks for the safety and security we enjoy in Australia and ask for your blessing on all who have had to flee the countries of their birth because of conflict or persecution. We pray they get the support they need to endure and flourish and ask with them for peace in the countries they have come from. We pray in the name of the one we call Prince Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.