

The Feast of The Epiphany 2026, Year A

Isaiah 60.1-6, Matthew 2.1-12

Once again we are in the prophecy of Isaiah, heralding the fulfilment of the ancient promises of God: *Arise, shine, for your light has come! The glory of the Lord has risen upon you! Your scattered beloved ones will return, prosperity and safety will be yours, you will be radiant, your heart will thrill and rejoice! Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawning.*

Those of us familiar with Handel's Messiah can't help but hear these words through that wonderful musical setting. They sing out from the page – and they belong to us. They are so rich and familiar, so much a part of our Advent, Christmas and Epiphany traditions in the Christian church, our music, our imagery. They stir us to hope and joy and courage to face the new year strong in the promises of God's renewing action, the knowledge that the exiled ones will find home again and the destroyed places will be made whole.

But of course, these promises weren't originally for us, or for everyone. These words of Isaiah's were very specifically spoken to the covenant people of ancient Israel. And while all the way through Isaiah's prophecy there are hints and glimpses of a universal blessing, of Israel being made a beacon for the nations, the people of ancient Israel did not think of their Messiah as coming for the gentiles - the surrounding nations - as well as themselves.

That's why the Apostle Paul's conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all humanity, beginning with his own Jewish people, caused such a ruckus. It was offensive to Jew and Gentile alike. But Paul is firm in the revelation that he received, which is that through Jesus Christ, "the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." (Eph 3.6)

It is hard to stress enough how revolutionary this is. Christianity became the world's first pan-tribal, pan-ethnic religion in its insistence that the One who came into the world to save us was the same One who created the cosmos. And if that One is the Creator of all, then all people, Jew and Gentile alike, must be included in that salvation.

Our Epiphany Gospel reading reflects this burgeoning discovery, by having kings or sages from the East (i.e. Gentiles) pursuing a natural phenomenon, a star in the sky. Initially they understood the star as pointing to a local deity and a transformation of the governance of Israel – the birth of a new king of the Jews.

But something in their overwhelming joy, and in their experience of worshipping this child leaves them, and us, feeling as though they'd encountered something more than they'd bargained for, something that carried their spirits into a vast mystery, something that enabled them to refuse the demands of earthly power and "return home by another road" – a phrase that suggests transformed awareness.

Gradually, we come to see that the brightness of ancient Israel's dawn is a brightness that will cover the whole earth.

Malcolm Guite's Epiphany sonnet expresses these ideas really well. Here is what he says about the poem: "Until now the story of the coming Messiah has been confined to Israel, the covenant people, but here suddenly, mysteriously, are three Gentiles who have intuited that his birth is good news for them too. Here is an Epiphany, a revelation, that the birth of Christ is not one small step for a local religion but a great leap for all mankind." And this is the poem:

*It might have been just someone else's story,
Some chosen people get a special king.
We leave them to their own peculiar glory,
We don't belong, it doesn't mean a thing.
But when these three arrive they bring us with them,
Gentiles like us, their wisdom might be ours;
A steady step that finds an inner rhythm,
A pilgrim's eye that sees beyond the stars.
They did not know his name but still they sought him,
They came from elsewhere but still they found;
In temples they found those who sold and bought him,
But in the filthy stable, hallowed ground.
Their courage gives our questing hearts a voice
To seek, to find, to worship, to rejoice.*

What does this mean for us? It's important for us in the Christian west, inheritors of a long and complex Christian history, to remember that we Gentile Christians are not the centre and starting place of the Christian faith. Instead, we follow in the footsteps of those who travelled long distances, seeking, following the star, and were overjoyed at what they discovered.

We are those who "overhear" the good news that was first preached to the demoralised people of occupied Israel, and we have made it our own. This is a gift, a blessing, not something to take for granted. We are the recipients of something that has been shared, that has overflowed to reach us; we are not the original audience. Christianity is not our birthright, it is something that we pilgrim towards, and that is meant to convert us.

Those who have grown up in the church can find this difficult to grasp, even a bit affronting. I think we all like to feel and believe that this faith that we love belongs to us, rather than the other way round – that we have come to find our belonging and our identity *in it*. But Christianity, including the beautiful promises of Isaiah, the poetry of the psalms, the wisdom tradition, and the stories of creation, fall, exodus and exile – this is a home that we have been invited and adopted into, rather than our personal property. And it is a home that is often foreign, alien to us, not just through the ancient nature of its beginnings, but through massive cultural distance too.

It can be hard to feel as though we're not the first ones, or those at the centre who set the norms for everyone else. We western Christians, the products of Empire, are so used to seeing ourselves as the prototype for the best version of humanity. I suspect that this feeling sits underneath the troubled experience of exploring our settler colonial history in this country – the difficulty in realising that we Pākehā are here by invitation, by treaty covenant, by hospitality, and that our dominance is unfortunately the outcome of greed, rather than right.

Pākehā Christians might be helped in adjusting to this reality here in this land if we also took seriously what it means to be Gentile Christians – those who have been “grafted in,” rather than being the original plant. Learning to accept second, rather than first place...and then realising that life isn’t a race anyway.

Our calling as Gentile Christians is to learn from the posture of the Magi, to seek diligently, to travel as pilgrims, traversing the mental, emotional and sometimes physical distance needed to worship the Christ in spirit and truth. To embrace difficulty and fatigue as part of the journey, and not to expect that faith will come easily to us. And to continually be surprised and delighted by joy – not the complacent joy of enjoying a birthright, but the joy that comes from being allowed in on the deep secrets of the universe.

There is a great mystery at the heart of things: the plan of God to redeem and heal the world through Jesus Christ - Palestinian Jew and Son of God. We bring our gold, our frankincense and our myrrh, our best, our deepest, and our fullest selves, and we worship in awe and wonder.

**St John’s Royal Oak,
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