

## CELEBRATING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Isaiah 60. 1-6  
Ephesians 3. 1-12  
Matthew 2. 1-12

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

If you ever visit the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany you will see that behind the main altar there is a large reliquary said to contain the bones (or at least the skulls) of the three wise men. ‘How did they get to Cologne?’ you might ask. The wise men’s bones are said to have been located in Persia and then brought to Constantinople by St Helena. St Helena was the mother of Constantine, the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. The bones were transferred from Constantinople to Milan in the fifth century and then to Cologne in 1163. So not only did the wise men journey during their lives; even after death, their relics went on a journey. Although Matthew does not tell us the names of the wise men, since the Middle Ages the Western Church has traditionally given them the names Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar. You may have noted that in his text, Matthew does not tell us the number of wise men; he simply states that they offered three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

These wise men were not Jews; they were from the East, outside of Israel. They therefore could not claim to be able to benefit from the ancient covenant that God had made with his chosen people. These wise men were foreigners and strangers. Scholars believe that they were priests of an Eastern religion (perhaps Zoroastrian) who consulted the stars. One of them is even thought to have been a king: there is speculation that one of them was Azes II of Bactria (now western Pakistan) who reigned from 35 BC to 10 AD.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a struggle that goes on, an argument about just who exactly is included in the promises of God. One group of writers clearly believes that it is only the people of Israel who are, and who always will be, loved by God. They believe that everyone else, no matter how good they are, no matter how moral and righteous they are, is outside of God's love. These people can never benefit from the covenant. They are not within the bloodline and inheritance of Israel; they are forever outsiders.

But there is another school of thought that crops up throughout the history of Israel. These folks believe that when the Messiah comes, God's promise is for everyone who believes. Consider, for example, our text from Isaiah, who writes, 'Nations (and he means nations other than Israel) shall come to your light'; or the writer of the Book of Ruth, who makes a great point of reminding us that even King David himself was the great-grandson of a foreigner, the Ruth who is portrayed in that book. Over and over, as the scriptures lay out the Law by which the Israelites were to conduct themselves, they are called upon to make room for the 'stranger and sojourner', as the phrase goes: they were called to welcome the strangers, to offer hospitality to all and to receive those who would come to live among them.

This argument continues in full force in New Testament times. It is at the heart of Paul's argument with Peter, about whether the Gentiles – the foreigners, the strangers and sojourners – are to be received into the Body of Christ, or whether this Body is reserved only for those of Israelite blood and lineage. Paul is convinced that he has been called as an 'apostle to the Gentiles'; but Peter (as well as James, the Lord's brother) think that the proclamation of the gospel is for Jews only.

You know the outcome, of course. There's hardly one of us who would be at St Stephen's today if Peter had won that argument. Paul preached the good news to

the foreigners, those considered to be outside the covenant, and therefore we – we, the Gentiles – are indeed included in the Body of Christ.

But Matthew's story of the visit of the wise men says that the matter was decided by God, long before Peter and Paul fought it out. These 'wise men from the East' were Gentiles, who saw the star – a sign from God – and followed it. They followed it across deserts and mountains and across national barriers; across their own scholarly barriers of scepticism and disdain and fear; and came at last to the place where the new-born King lay. And when they saw him, they knelt down and paid him homage. In other words, they pledged their allegiance to him, and in that sign permanently committed themselves to follow him. As they did this, they were welcomed, just as we are.

How do we know that they were welcomed? Well, their gifts were accepted. In fact, their gifts symbolise the whole meaning of the life of this new-born King. The gold, which represents wealth and royalty, was the sign that he would be King. The frankincense – incense, which was burned daily in the Jerusalem temple as a holy offering to God – was the sign that he was holy, our 'Great High Priest', as the epistle to the Hebrews calls him. And the myrrh, a bitter spice used to wrap the bodies of the dead, was the sign that, royal and holy though this infant King was, he would die.

But what about us? We are the Gentiles, called to be part of the covenant of love and peace, the promise of God given through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. We are called to transcend all barriers to come to him. Compared to the wise men, not many of us actually have to cross trackless desert on camelback to reach him. But we *do* have to transcend our own barriers: our scepticism, our self-centeredness and our pride. We are called out of ourselves and into Christ, to worship in silent awe at the cradle of this baby who is the creative force of the world.

In this, we are not alone. There are still strangers and sojourners in our world, people who are seeking light and truth, people who are looking for the love of God and the peace of Christ. The stable door is always open to them and to all. And we, those of us who have already arrived at that stable door, are called like our Hebrew ancestors to welcome the stranger and sojourner to the stable; to our hearts; and to the life in Christ.

This Feast of the Epiphany is not just an important holy day in the Christmas cycle. It is, in a sense, the beginning of its own season, the season of Epiphany. Throughout the centuries, Epiphany has been the season when we remember and celebrate the mission of the Church, as it spreads throughout the world. As the light of the sun strengthens and lengthens each day of this season, so we are reminded that the light of Christ reaches ever further into our hearts and the hearts of the world; even into its most troubled corners.

This Epiphany is a time for us to commit ourselves to be part of this spreading of the light, of the Gospel, to the ends of the earth. Having worshipped at the manger, the wise men carried the light of Christ out into the world with them as they returned to their homes. So we, too, are called to rise from our worship at the manger and to move steadily into the world, bearing the light of Christ: to the places where we work, to the places where we study, and to the places where we live. And as we do this, we are called to welcome all those who come to share in the light.

Amen.