

## THE FEAST of the EPIPHANY of OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST     6 January 2019

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White, Rector of St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

The Feast of the Epiphany –6 January, the 13<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas—falls on a Sunday only every few years, and so the birth narrative (the Christmas Story) in Matthew's Gospel can go a bit ignored. Matthew's is the only Gospel to tell us the story of the visitors to Bethlehem whom King Herod is so unhappy to greet, and although we probably remember the outlines of the story, reflecting a bit on how traditions have filled in these outlines may tell us something ....

In Matthew's Gospel, the three kings are, in fact, not kings at all but rather *magi* –astrologers, probably from Babylon whom we know scanned the skies and traveled to the west to visit important kings. Nor are these three persons necessarily three in number: later commentators deduced from the number of gifts –gold, frankincense, and myrrh—that there were three gift-givers, but still more enthusiastic early commentators suggested that the number of gifts was in fact twelve. This number is the same number as the Tribes of Israel and so of the original disciples.

And the Hebrew prophets and the Psalms interpreted the meaning of the gifts: the extravagant gold was about kingship in this world; the costly frankincense was about Divinity beyond this world; and the equally costly myrrh was about embalming, a foreshadowing of the Passion and the death on the Cross.

By the 8<sup>th</sup> century –1300 years ago—the magi/kings had even acquired names. Melchior is an elderly white man with a white beard; Gaspar is a beardless young white man with a ruddy complexion reminiscent of the young King David; and Balthazar is a bearded, dark-skinned man.

And what the traditions that grew up around the story tell us is something that Matthew's, Luke's, and John's Gospels (Mark's Gospel has no birth narrative) want to emphasise. Each insists that the first people to notice the world-changing arrival of the Messiah –the Anointed One—in apparently unassuming circumstances are not the people whom the Hebrew Scriptures have instructed to be on the look-out .... In Luke's Gospel they are shepherds, low-lives with despicable reputations; in Matthew's Gospel they are magi, who may be important elsewhere but ... not around here. And John's Gospel puts it succinctly: 'He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed ... he gave power to become children of God'.

You see, the Feast of the Epiphany is about the power of revelation, of suddenly seeing, knowing, feeling something ... important, beyond important. It is about people –whatever their number or names—from outside the learning of the Hebrew tradition responding to a star, a light, and looking to see where it might lead them, looking to see if it might bring them to where they need to be.

And although this story is about revelation coming to people other than the obvious ones, it is perhaps still more importantly a story about light, the light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness does not overcome, the light that God shines into the world and that we often choose to ignore or to resist.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells those who have sought him out that, 'You are the salt [the enlivening agent] of the earth .... You are the light of the world .... No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to the whole house .... Let your light shine before others so that they see your good works and give glory to' God.

The light that is not overcome shines, and it can inspire, empower all of us if we allow it: it is ours to share, to shine into other lives. And so, I wish each of us a blessed Epiphany season of shining ... and sharing. Share what you have: let your light shine into the lives of others that they may give thanks to God. Amen.