

**Epiphany, January 3, 2020, St. Anne's
Isaiah 60.1-6; Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12**

One of the things I like to do in my downtime is read books – often *mystery* stories. I'm not alone in liking mysteries of course - most bookstores have a fair-sized section devoted to them. As a teenager I started out reading the 'classic mysteries' like Agatha Christie's where the plot usually involves numerous suspects with various motives. But, by the end of the story the 'master detective' has put it all together and solved the case. That's one of the comforting things about mystery stories - by the end, the mystery is *solved*, and all the ends are neatly tied up. **Sooo** unlike *real* life where we just keep muddling along and there's *rarely* a point when we can say we have 'the solution' to the problems we face!

Today's scripture readings are about mystery – our passage from Ephesians certainly makes that clear. Did you notice how many times Paul uses the word 'mystery' in today's reading? Paul says that a mystery has been made known to him, and it's a mystery about Jesus. No one has really understood this mystery before - it has been hidden through the ages. So those who listen will come to know the mystery. Apparently, God knows we like a good mystery!

Of course, the mystery that Epiphany celebrates isn't like the ones in a mystery novel. For one thing the heart of the story isn't something *tragic*, like theft or murder, but something wonderful - a divine gift. Paul asserts that what's so mysterious is that God has added a whole new group of heirs – the Gentiles - into the divine 'will'. But, this **doesn't** short-change the Jews who were already heirs, because there's plenty to go around. So, the mystery in this case is the mystery of *grace*. In many ways this is the theme of our Old Testament and Gospel readings too - God's mysterious grace breaking into a dark world.

The story of the Magi following a mysterious star to find a new-born king has captured the imagination of Christians for centuries and has inspired numerous legends. We rarely question the idea that there were 3 Magi, but it wasn't till the **Middle Ages**, that the European Church settled on **three** Magi and assigned them the names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. (previously there had been various numbers and the Eastern church still has *twelve* Magi). In popular imagination the Magi are often called 'kings' - probably by conflating the Magi with the kings in the passage from Isaiah we heard this morning. They also came to be called "wise men" - an identification so pervasive it's even used in some English translations of the Bible. But if you heard my sermon *last* Epiphany then you'll know that the Magi were **definitely not** 'kings' nor 'wise men'! They would be better described as magicians, fortune-tellers or horoscope fanatics.

Though we've come to love this imagery of the '3 kings' from the east coming to pay homage to Jesus, it probably distracts us from the story Matthew is telling us. Today's gospel **is** indeed about kings and wise men, but they *aren't* the Magi. There are actually **2 kings** in this story - Herod and Jesus. *Herod* is the kind of king Jesus later denounces - a tyrant who lords over his people. By contrast, the infant Jesus is helpless and vulnerable, a ruler whose power is hidden in humility. And the *wise men* in this story are actually the chief priests and the scribes who advise *Herod*. They **know** the scriptures and possess academic knowledge that both Herod and the Magi lack. But all that knowledge **doesn't** lead them to the Messiah – it just ends up getting them involved in a plot to kill him. They know where to *find* the Christ, but they're *blind* to the real truth about 'who' he **is**. The *truth* about this infant messiah is revealed to the sketchy outsiders - *not* to the knowledgeable people in the *centre* of God's people. As intelligent and knowledgeable people ourselves, that's a lesson *we* need to take to heart. Knowing the right answer

doesn't always give us the insight to know what's important or right, and it **definitely** doesn't give us superiority in God's eyes.

Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus asserts that God's wisdom is revealed to the servant and the infant and **not** to the wise and intelligent. I think it's helpful to look at the story of the Magi in light of that statement. Matthew depicts the Magi as people who *aren't* seeking honour for themselves but are following where the path leads them. Men who are willing to humble themselves, even kneeling before a peasant woman and a child! Clearly, they fit the image of *servants* better than that of *kings*. More surprisingly perhaps, they also embody the traits attributed to *infants* in Matthew. God reveals to them what is *hidden*, and they, unlike King Herod and his advisors, *are* able to truly humble themselves in the presence of the Christ. In other words, **they're** the ones God favours over the powerful, the intelligent and the wise. So, there's an irony in the fact that by calling them 'kings' and 'wise men' we've obscured the message that Matthew was probably *intending* us to hear when he included this story in his gospel. Which is probably **not** *entirely* an accident. The idea that being knowledgeable and intelligent in human terms *doesn't* make us favoured by **God** is a hard message to hear for those of us who *fit* that description – and it *always has been*.

In any case, just like in my beloved mystery novels, by the end of the story, the mystery *is* revealed – the Messiah is found and the light shines in the darkness. A king is revealed who will usher in a new kind of kingdom – one where God's purpose is shown to be the unification of humanity into a truly *inclusive* community where all distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders" have vanished. Matthew tells us this story to show that these distinctions *begin to erode*

with the very *birth* of Jesus the Christ, who was revealed to these sketchy *outsiders*, and was rejected by many who *thought they* were on the *inside*.

But one big difference in *this* mystery is that the *revelation* is *not* the **end** of the story – instead it's the **start** of a new era in the ongoing story. The usual pattern is that once the mystery is revealed, we can close the book. The case is solved. The suspense is over. But for Paul as well as Matthew the *revelation* of the mystery is just the **beginning**. Knowing who the Messiah **is**, is never an end in itself. When God extends the divine covenant to the Gentiles, it opens up a vast new chapter – *our* chapter - in the story of God's care and grace. The revelation of the mystery of Christ's coming into the world continues – in the story of Christians throughout the centuries, in the story of St. Anne's and our ongoing mission to spread the good news of what God has done through Jesus the Christ. It continues in **your** story, and in *my* story, as we experience God's grace and love in our own lives and work to *spread* that grace and love into the world around us.

The story we celebrate today encourages humble acknowledgment of a mystery – the mystery that God's glory and light is often manifested where *we* least expect it. *Sometimes* as God's people we *become* light for others; and sadly, *sometimes* we're *blind* to the light others *can* see. But *always*, the light **is** there, as God graciously and mysteriously breaks into *our* world, and our lives, to bring grace and mercy and love to all. And **that's** a mystery worth staking your life on.