

Sermon
Rev Ralph Clarke
Eaglehawk Uniting Church
Sunday 6th January 2013

Readings: Is 60:1-6; Psm 72:1-14; Matt 2:1-12

Anthony De Mello tells a story of a guru whose cat used to come with him to worship. The cat was a distraction during the guru's teaching so he used to tie it to the rails during the service. After the guru died, people were so used to the cat being tied up that others used to bring a cat and tie it up during worship. Centuries later, learned treatises were written about the essential role of a cat being tied up during worship. (Song of the Bird p79)

That story is a bit of jest about the way we make and keep traditions. Something like it has happened in relation to the story of the wise men in Matthew 2. We have developed traditions that are only marginally related to that story. We talk of 3 wise men when Matthew gives no number. We sing the song "We three Kings" although Matthew refused to call the wise men kings. Many emphasise the bit about these men coming from the east. The 6th century gave them eastern names like Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. We have sometimes tried to focus on the meaning of the wise men's gifts like gold for a king, incense for God and myrrh for one who is to die and "the story of the other wise man", who gave away all his gifts. Traditions developed that Thomas the apostle baptised the wise men and ordained them as priests. Later on these men were said to have been martyred and still later buried at Cologne in Germany. We've preached lots of sermons on the whether the star was factual, and tried to offer proofs like the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7BC.

It can often be difficult to sort out fact from fiction or assumption. We found that again recently when an old Mayan calendar that ended on the 21st December 2012 was seen by a few as a sign of the end of the world.

So what can we make of Matthew's story. Only, I think what Matthew made of it,
1. That Jesus is from God, and the one in whom God continues the great story of salvation, and,
2. That responses to Jesus vary from surprising devotion by the eastern magi, to those who see Jesus as a threat.

Matthew leaves us in no doubt that Jesus is the one who continues God's great story of salvation. Celestial events were often thought to accompany the birth or anointing of new leaders but asking if the star was caused by God or was an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in 7BC, seems pretty pointless to me. The real star is Jesus. Jesus is the focus here. I think we must also avoid making the gifts of the magi the point of this story. Modern media may focus on gifts and Santa at Christmas instead of the Christ-child, but here, the gifts are for the child. The gifts are part of the worship of Jesus.

We are being invited to place our faith in Jesus, and to rely upon him. We can have faith in him even when we struggle with illness, disappointment or tragedy. Faith in him is possible through all the changes and challenges in life.

Matthew's story regards devotion to Christ as something important and special, and more than something relegated to an hour on Sunday. What difference would it make in your life if, like these men, you were known and remembered for your devotion to Christ? There's some possibility that these wise men were magicians, which comes from the word Magi, and that the gifts in their trunks were their tools of trade offered to the Christ child. What difference would it make to you if you used your wealth and gifts every day as an offering to God?

Matthew also wants us to hear about Herod's fear of a new king being born. We sense with the wise men, that Jesus himself is under threat, and so is God's work. Yet Matthew shows that it takes more than a cruel Herod to threaten the work and love of God. Countless numbers of martyrs have discovered the truth of this over the centuries since then. For Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, and leaders felt threatened by the birth of both Moses and Jesus which led to lots of children being killed. Yet as Hebrews discovered in the past, it takes more than the fear or paranoia of leaders, or the onset of tragedies, illness, disability and other losses to cancel the great and unending love God has for us.

It's not only Herod who feels threatened when his activities plans and desires are challenged by Jesus love and grace. Some of us might have trouble when Jesus teaching about including others, conflicts with keeping refugees out of the country, or, when giving priority to dealing with poverty, disabilities or health needs conflicts with accumulating money, or users pay policies.

The church can expect that people will tell the church to go away into its own little corner when it speaks in public of love mercy, peace and justice. To some, those themes might sound alien to what the real world is about. Yet our task is to let these themes be heard. Matthew seems to anticipate Jesus future conflicts, suffering and death as people try to protect their own activities from the rule or kingdom of God. Instead, He calls us to join the Magi in offering our own worship, faith and trust in him.