

**Isaiah 60:1-6**  
**Psalms 50**  
**Ephesians 3:1-10**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

**Sermon preached by Rev. Harry Kerr**

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When we tell the Christmas story it's a bit like watching two TVs tuned to different stations at the same time, channel Luke and channel Matthew. Both tell stories of Jesus birth. They are different stories each with their own message. Today as we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany we tune out channel Luke and concentrate on Matthew's story which focuses on the coming of the magi to the infant Jesus.

Matthew is speaking to a Jewish Christian community in Syria. They would have been struggling with what the message of Jesus could possibly mean to them. They were in a strange place. The synagogue rejected them and shut them out of their traditions. They were in a foreign land with a strange culture and many religions and practices. Who were they now?

Matthew tells his Christmas story to two do two things. First it is clear right from his birth, that Jesus comes out of the story of God's people. He is born in Bethlehem, David's city. People who were not Jews were coming to their church. They were uncertain what to do about this. Matthew points to passages like the passage from Isaiah we read earlier and to Psalm 72 to-day's psalms. He shows that people from all over the world have come to pay homage to the one God has chosen and to bring the gifts due to a King. His birth is marked by the rising of a new star, the morning star, the sign that God was doing something new... another Old Testament reference. Now it's happening again

Matthew's second point is that this King is different. He is not like David. He is not a tribal leader. The people who get the message, who come to worship him and bring costly gifts are from that strange and alien world out there.. The magi were probably Persian priests, maybe of the Zoroastrian religion. They were big on astrology and interpreting the mysteries of the heavens, people who could answer the great unanswerable questions and read the signs of the times but very alien to the embattled Jewish community in Syria. Matthew says these strange people from that strange world with their strange ideas discerned what the star was about. In the Christ child, God is surprising earth with heaven. They are the ones who bring costly gifts and worship the newborn king just as the old stories had prophesied.

Is Matthew saying to this embattled community...you don't need to hide from the alien culture around you? You don't need to worry about people from that culture who want to join your church. Jesus draws the most unlikely people into his life and into his worship. Jesus is not your tribal leader, Jesus is the universal king. His message, his image of God is for all people. So come out of your shell and open up. That's where the new life is. St Paul in the reading from Ephesians spells it out. He describes it as the *mystery of Christ*. He says: *The whole human race was in the dark about it until now. And, in a nutshell, this is what it is all about: the Gentiles are God's chosen people too! There is only one body of people who will inherit all that God has promised, and Jesus Christ has opened it up to everybody, regardless of their origins. No more segregation - Christ has put the welcome mat out for everyone.*

That's the message of Epiphany for us too. We find ourselves in an alien world, with all sorts of weird ideas around where very few people seem to be interested. Christmas is a beautiful time but not many people believe it to have anything to do with the meaning of the universe. Our future as a church is far from certain. The temptation is to become defensive and inward looking. But the message is clear. *Christ has put to welcome mat out for everyone.* We can be confident that Jesus has abolished tribalism. We don't need to be tribal. There are people out there who are searching as the magi were searching, who see the star but have no idea where it goes. There are many people who will work with us and make common cause with us and maybe engage with us. At a very basic level we must expect that people will walk in off the street on a Sunday morning to check us out. We need to try and see what goes on through their eyes. A colleague told me how he advertised in the local paper for people to come to explore the faith with him. The first evening this woman turned up and introduced herself. Much later after she had eventually been baptised and confirmed she told him that on that first evening she sat outside in the car for ten minutes watching who was going in, wondering if she dare join them. What signals can we send that Jesus really has put the welcome out for everyone? Stephen Ames, who some of you know, is running courses at the Uni in science and faith. He finds the students can't get enough of it. This week we have had several young people passing though our home en route to NCYC. Some from Bali some from West Timor. Their church is in a very different environment and yet they are confident and engaged at several levels.

Matthew's story includes the dark side of Christmas, the bit we don't want to hear too much about. Over it all hangs the dark figure of Herod, the self made tyrant, the Mugabe, or Saddam or the Burmese Generals of his day, paranoid about possible rivals. Herod is power. Power is threatened by the one who welcomes all people. A news item on Christmas day tells of a parish priest in Italy who expressed the openness of the Christmas story by putting a mosque in his crib scene. Some of the anti migrant heavies were so enraged by this they threatened to bomb his church. The magi were over the moon when they found the Christ child. Herod went berserk, *everybody in Jerusalem was on edge.* Herod is determined to destroy a potential rival with ghastly collateral damage which continues to-day with the children of Gaza. The Christmas story always points to Good Friday. The coming of God in love and peace draws out the evil, the power crazy, and the corruption. From the beginning the conflict is inevitable. And that is part of where we are. When we live the message of Epiphany we must expect opposition. For Christians in some places it is very direct and very brutal. For us it may be more subtle. We may find ourselves tuned out and not taken seriously. Individuals who stand for the values of Christ will be marginalised and ignored in all kinds of ways. To worship the Christ child is to follow the crucified one and we should be under no illusions. And Indian Christmas meditation says *God is with us, terribly simply with us and the shadow of men and women with arms outstretched to take him, fall across the manger in the form of a cross.*

We celebrate Epiphany with exceeding joy. We remember Jesus own words: *In the world you will have tribulation. Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.*