

EPIPHANY AS IT MAY BE UNDERSTOOD TODAY

Matt. 2:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12 gives us an account of the visit of the Magi. There must be a reason for the inclusion of this story in the Gospel. Why is it included and more importantly what is the message? The liturgical celebration of it, however, did not start until the fourth century, shortly after Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity. The Three Kings Holiday or Offenbarung, Die Heilige Drei Konige, is celebrated 12 days after the Christmas event that was set as December 25.

This morning I wish to focus on:

1. The writer's intent with the gospel account of the Three Kings.
2. The parallels from the Jewish scripture.
3. Current implications.

I always remember this day in a special way because my brother's birthday was January 6. In high school I had a special friend whose birthday also was January 6. Furthermore, I do not know how many times I have sung the solo part representing one of the kings for '**We Three Kings of Orient Are**'. It was Gentile Christians who interpreted this Matthew story of the Magi literally. We of the none Jewish world have been telling the story this way ever since. Great West Life Insurance Company has the three wise men in royal regalia sitting on three camels on the entrance to their corporate headquarters on Broadway. We all have seen such images.

How did Jewish people of the first century and Matthew in particular understand this event? It should be noted that all of the Gospel writers were Jewish Christians. Jesus was a Jew. Bible scholars tell us that none of the Gospel writers were eye witnesses of any of the Jesus events (4 BCE- 30CE.). They wrote their gospels some 40 to 65 years after the death of Jesus 30 CE. The Gospel writers were writing to a Jewish audience who was familiar with the Torah. The Gospels are written in classical Greek, but Jesus and his disciples spoke only Aramaic. Apparently 95% of the Galilean/Samaritan population was illiterate at the time of Jesus. It is believed that Gospel writers were Jewish Christian members of a synagogue who were interpreting the life of Jesus in light of the Torah or OT. At the time, the Torah is an amazing 1000+ year old epic of how Jewish people came to understand themselves and how they have encountered the Holy One in the formation as a chosen people. **The Synoptic Gospel writers were making a portrait interpretation of who Jesus was in light of the Torah, their epic story.**

Matthew sees many meaningful connections of the life of Jesus with the OT. Julie Derksen drew some attention to this last Sunday. Joseph encounters God only in dreams--- Joseph of old was an interpreter of dreams, after the birth of Jesus, many innocent boys were killed---Pharaoh killed many boys. Professional bible scholars have noted that the Moses story may be mirrored in many ways in the ministry of the Jesus story.

Further interesting epic story details may be cited with the story of the establishment of the **King David/Solomon** kingdom. That kingdom's glory died when Jewish people experienced the Babylonian captivity and exile six centuries before the birth of Jesus. The Jewish people were left traumatized and as a "chosen people", they had lost every symbol of their Jewish identity. Since they had lost their land, they thought they had lost their God as well. They wondered how they could ever "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land". (Ps. 137:3,4) They did dream of the re-emergence of an ideal king they called **Messiah** who would someday restore the fortunes of Jews.

Indeed, a new vision was actually presented by **Isaiah** (chapters 40-50) and **Zechariah** (chapters 9-14). The Suffering Servant was to bring wholeness to human life by absorbing life's pain, accepting life's abuse, and entering life's evil. This new leader *Messiah* would drain anger from people's soul and restore the world to health. **Bible scholars** show that within the old epic, a new dimension of thought with different values was emerging that had *universal* appeal. The sacred story of the Jews now saw *love* as the primary nature of God, saw *social justice* as the goal of God. *The leaders of the covenant people are not identified with power images.*

1. This image of a loving God has a **drawing appeal** for other nations as a light shining out of Jerusalem. Matthew and other scribes and Torah students of the time, see in Jesus's life and teachings **parallels** with Messiah visions of old. In keeping with this theme, Matthew has wise men from the east following a star in search of the new born king arrive in Jerusalem. A bright light was shining! *Where in the O.T. might this image come from?* Consider the passages from **Isaiah 60:1-7**, **Micah 7:18-20**, **Micah 5:2**, and the reputation Jesus had as Matthew himself records in **Matthew 4:23-25**. Jesus had been an **unusual phenomenon** under the powerful rule of Rome on the one hand and simultaneously under rigorous Jewish temple elites of Jerusalem. These Jews of the Temple at the time of Jesus had 613 ordinances that emphasized purity laws or correct worship rituals. **Every Jewish person** of the first century would know how oppressive their

situation was. When Matthew wrote the Gospel around 80 CE, the Temple had recently been completely destroyed. Rome demanded complete submission. Thousands of insubordinates had been crucified. After Matthew's time, more tragedy struck Palestine. The language of submission was anathema to every devote Jew. Emperor Trajan/Hadrian visited Jerusalem in 117 CE, built a temple dedicated to Jupiter and renamed Jerusalem Aelia Capitolina. In 132 CE one more resistance movement took place under the leadership of Bar Kosiba later considered a Messiah and renamed Bar Kokhba. Hadrian in a rage, ordered the desolation of the Judean landscape. Jewish Christians have been absent in the in the developing Christian story ever since. There were no Jewish Christians left in the Christian community after 150CE. Jewish Christians were not present in the councils that produced the Nicene Creed. Sadly, Jews were not only crucified and enslaved by the Romans, they were ostracized and persecuted by Gentile Christians for the next one and half millennia by Christians as the Christ killers.

2. Matthew's literary portrait of three Kings bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh became a literal story when Gentile Christians picked up the story 400 years later after Christ. Gentile Christians never read the Torah, did not understand it, and we have been hearing a literal story of the Wise Men like that ever since.

This story of the Magi with new meanings has important implications for us today. McLaren suggests that when we think of Messiah, words such as kingdom, dominion, supreme, elect, chosen, representing an earthly kingdom be avoided and suggests a radical rejection of earthly dominating supremacy of Messiah all forms be eliminated. Rather than seizing, hoarding, and exercising power in the domineering ways, typical of kings, conquistadors, or many religious leaders of the past, Jesus was consistently empowering others. (Philippians 2) Jesus manifested the true nature of G-d. Think about the implications of this way of thinking about Jesus—self-giving, humble path of gentleness, empathy, servant leadership. No image of a conquering king, who produces violence, domination, enslavement, exploitation, supremacy, and privilege. Indeed, Jesus faithfully and courageously represented the non-violent, extravagant self-giving love of G-d. It was this vision for **universal application** that is implied in the story of the Magi following the bright light of a star.

This Jesus portrayal tells us that God welcomes all people – all races, ethnic backgrounds, genders, and sexual orientations---to find their place at the table of the Lord. This remarkable Bible interpretation has evolved into being not a weapon to enforce prejudice, but an invitation to come as you are in order to become all that you can be as a human.

I like to share an epiphany experience I had almost 40 years ago that came to me as a question. Greti and I were in **Chongqing** on assignment at the Medical College with the MCC/CEE program. At the time, China was emerging from the oriental obscurity of the Bamboo Curtain and the then recent terrible tragedy of the Cultural Revolution were millions had died of starvation. When we were there in 1983, Chinese people were still under the strong grip of the communist government. Our movements were under constant watch and control. We were English teachers as part of the Chinese newly adopted modernization agenda. While we enjoyed our assignment, we certainly felt the personal restrictions as well.

After 5-6 months into the assignment, we had the distinct pleasure of a visit of **Atlee and Winnifred Beachy** of Goshen college. Goshen College had the student abroad semester program for all its students. Some of the Goshen students lived and studied in a special dorm in **Chengdu**, a neighboring city. Atlee and Winifred spent a week with us. In the privacy of our apartment, we shared many incidents about the absurdities the Chinese control system. Well into this conversation, Atlee asked us suddenly if we had seen any evidence of God's presence in China? That was a mind arresting question for me and has stuck with me ever since. Do I have eyes to see, do I have ears to hear God? ***The challenge to see, to hear, has stayed with me ever since.***

When you read the stories and parables of Jesus consider for a moment how quickly and frequently Jesus saw God at work everywhere when the hungry were fed, when the lame were able to walk, when demons were cast out, storms were calmed, relationships were restored, and the good news of the kingdom was announced. Jesus blessed little children because they had complete trust in such *kingdom New Life Ways*. Everywhere Jesus went, he acted with compassion and attentiveness in a way that brought people into the presence of God. In the parable of the sower found in the gospel of Luke, Jesus actually challenges the disciples to have ears to hear and see to see God at work. In that account, the disciples appear not being able to understand. As Matthew's gospel tells it, the message of salvation may be understood, as a loving response with others in the presence of God's New

Age. Salvation (experiencing God's grace) is found as being a spirit of God as we relate to others in the world in which we live.

Some thoughts about some possible examples: 1. CBC national news reported the case of a student named **Leonard Mawora** from Africa at Mount Alison University, NFL who lost his passport and an air ticket left in a shopping bag. He had wanted to go home for Christmas but now without a passport his status even as a Canadian student was in doubt. The news appeal was that if the passport was found, please return it to this student. The good news was that the passport was found---that's not the miracle, finding the missing wallet always was a statistical possibility. The wonderful sign of God at work was that that the lady who found it, not only returned the passport, paid for his ticket home and invited the student for a Christmas dinner later on. She made a loving, generous gesture is a sign of God with us today.

2. I have been deeply impressed with Winnipeg's Dr. **Crayton** and his experiences at Siloam Mission that have been life-altering, and led him to write an unflinching, heart-rending new book, *Wisdom from the Homeless: Lessons a Doctor Learned at a Homeless Shelter*. There are two episodes of foot-washings described by the doctor that caught my attention. God certainly was evident here!

3 Mary Hynes of CBC Tapestry at 25: **Let There Be Light**. Welcoming Strangers. Making happy memories and ditching old stuff. There is a wonderful interview with a Quaker minister who see the divinity of God in every human being It was an inspiring conversation to hear for myself. In India, Hindus greet each other with 'Namaste'. "*I greet the god in you*".

4. Two weeks ago, I received a report of a modern-day wise man Rohit Kumar from India. Kumar works with high school students on emotional intelligence and adolescence issues to help make them bullying-free zones. Kumar is a Hindu, but like many others in India he too celebrates Christmas. He also sees God in many places. He uses the Jesus story to make a report.

The light Shines! Let us follow and the star!

January 5/2020.

25/DEC/2019

It's one of India's wonderful oddities that more Hindus in the country celebrate Christmas than do Christians, simply because there are so many more Hindus in India than there are Christians. Like many non-Christians around India, I too decorate a Christmas tree every year, give presents to those I care about, and happily sing carols (mostly off-key) with family, friends and neighbours (mostly non-Christian). I also make it a point every year to read the story of the first Christmas in the New Testament.

This year, though, I am finding it difficult to celebrate. How does one sing "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright" when a heartless and calculatedly divisive Citizenship (Amendment) Act has been passed in parliament, students brutalised on their own campuses, Muslims systematically attacked in Uttar Pradesh, and thousands detained across the country?

All is not calm. All is certainly not bright.

Nevertheless, I pick up a Bible gifted to me long years ago by a Christian friend and start reading the Gospel account of the birth of Jesus in the first chapters of the New Testament. Matthew and Luke narrate the moving account of Mary and Joseph's long and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, in obedience, as it were, to the arbitrary whims of the tyrannical government of their day.

"And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city." — Luke 2:1, New King James Version.

'Registered'? How strange to find that word in the Bible at a time like this! And how ironical that our present day Caesars have also decreed that all the citizens of India be registered! It's remarkable how little things change over the millennia – tyrants keep trying to exert inordinate control, and the poor keep continuing to suffer because of it.

I continue reading.

"Joseph also went to the city of Bethlehem, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." — Luke 2: 4-7

What a perfect picture of the plight of the poor. A pregnant woman about to give birth to her firstborn, her desperate husband knocking on the doors of the town's inns trying to find a place to stay for the night, but being turned away by innkeeper after

innkeeper, till one of them finally says, 'There's no room in the inn but there is a stable next door. Spend the night there if you want.'

2

This particular innkeeper has been held up in the Christian tradition as a kind and helpful man, but I have often wondered how he could, in all good conscience, let a poor, pregnant woman and her husband take shelter in a place meant for animals. But then perhaps that is the best most 'haves' can do for the 'have-nots'. Just enough to assuage their conscience without disrupting their own lives too much, and then get back to the party.

I continue to read the rest of the Christmas story about the angels who appear to the shepherds, and the wise men from the east who follow a star and who come bearing gifts for the newborn child. But then I do something I don't remember doing before. I move past the story of the birth and start reading about the life of the adult Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

And as I do, I start to realise just how much the Jesus of the Gospels has to say to so many of us today....

To those like Harsh Mander who have cast their lot with India's Muslims and are working day and night to try and bring peace and understanding between communities, he says:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." – Matthew 5:9

To those who have been brave enough to speak the truth, but have been lied about by the 'godi media' and attacked viciously by the ruling party's infamous IT cell, he says:

"Blessed are you when men shall revile you and say all manner of evil against you falsely. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward. For so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." – Matthew 5:11,12

(The term 'prophet', incidentally, doesn't just mean 'predictor of future events'. Here, it means 'a teller of truth'.)

In times like these it is easy to seek revenge for wrongdoing, but to those who are tempted to return hate with hate, he says,

"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you". – Matthew 5:44

To those who wonder about the various godmen and gurus who dispense spiritual instruction to the masses while at the same time aligning themselves openly with the religious right-wing, he says:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,

3

nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Therefore by their fruits you will know them." – Matthew 7: 15 –20

To those who insist that God can only be worshipped in a certain place, he says:

"God is a spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." – John 4: 24

To those who stand with the poor and the persecuted as so many are in India today, he says,

"In that day I will tell you, 'I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.'

And when you will ask me, 'When did we do all these things?' I will say to you, 'inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me.' – Matthew 25

And to those who are wondering how we will ever be able to build an India where everyone is included, respected and valued, he says:

"Love the other as you love yourself." — Matthew 22:39

If enough people just did that – treated others the way they wish to be treated – our country would indeed become a kinder and better place.

I think about all those who are standing in support of their fellow citizens across the length and breadth of India. I think about the doctors and lawyers who are offering their services free of cost to those who have been attacked, harassed and persecuted. I think about the activists and journalists who are speaking up on behalf of those who do not have a voice of their own. And I think about those countless students and young people across India who have come out to tell the people of India that they will not be divided by the powers that be.

As I close my Bible and put it away, I realise that while the festive feeling may be missing, the spirit of Jesus is alive and well.

Rohit Kumar is an educator with a background in positive psychology and psychometrics. He works with high school students on emotional intelligence and adolescent issues to help make schools bullying-free zones. He can be reached at letsempathize@gmail.com