

Luke 2:21-38 & Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate Epiphany. What exactly is Epiphany, apart from the Wise men? Epiphany means “appearance” or “manifestation” or “revelation”. It can be a revealing scene, moment, or a manifestation, especially of a divine being. It can be a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of something that is very important to you. The term Epiphany was not actually in use until the fourteenth century.

The western church celebrates Epiphany with the arrival of the Magi who revealed Jesus to the Gentiles. The Eastern church celebrates Epiphany as the Baptism of Jesus, when he was revealed as the Son of God by the Holy Spirit.

Today we have two gospel readings, each represent a different Epiphany. The first occurs in Luke’s Gospel, long before the Magi appear. In keeping with Mosaic Law, Jesus is circumcised eight days after birth. He also receives a name that means “God saves” and thus signals his identity as Saviour. God’s messenger had given Jesus this name prior to his conception.

Mary and Joseph’s actions characterize them as pious observers of God’s commands. They bring Jesus to Jerusalem for “their” purification. Mosaic Law would have required purification only of Mary, who after having given birth, was ritually impure, meaning ineligible to touch sacred objects or enter temple grounds.

Luke combines the maternal purification ritual with the prescription that requires Joseph to dedicate the firstborn males to God to show both that Jesus has been born into a family of observant Jews and that, even as Lord, Saviour and Messiah, he too is subject to the law. Israelites, according to Mosaic law, were expected to dedicate their firstborn males to God.

In going to the Temple to dedicate Jesus, Joseph and Mary recall Hannah's bringing Samuel to the shrine at Shiloh to dedicate him to the Lord. Luke's infancy narrative has previously correlated the events surrounding Jesus' birth to those of Samuel's by way of Mary's canticle, which draws inspiration from Hannah's prayer.

Part of the cleansing ritual required a sacrifice, traditionally a lamb. However, Mary and Joseph were too poor to sacrifice a lamb, so they sacrificed two turtle doves or pigeons. According to the Torah, the turtle doves were an acceptable sacrifice for those of a poor economic status.

Luke's interweaving of prophetic traditions continues in the account of Simeon, rife as it is with language from Isaiah. The "consolation of Israel", to which he looks forward, recalls Isaiah's oracles that exhort the exiles to take comfort in their coming salvation and restoration. Simeon anticipates Israel's consolation and long-awaited hopes and expectations, which he is privileged to see firsthand through the orchestration of the divine hand.

The Holy spirit, who revealed that Simeon would see the Messiah, now leads him to the Temple at the same time as Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus, Simeon recognizes this baby to be God's Messiah, the embodiment of God's

salvation. This is Simeon's Epiphany, manifestation, or revelation.

Simeon's response comes in two parts: praise and joy, then sober warning. In his song of praise, known as the Nunc Dimittis ("Now you are dismissing"), Simeon considers himself dismissed from the task of awaiting God's salvation, now that he has seen Jesus. His search is now complete. He has been waiting a long time for this moment.

He questioned the arrival of every child or infant that was brought to the Temple. Is this the one he wondered as he searched for the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. Following his praise and joy, Simeon addresses his warning to Mary. Despite Jesus' identity as Israel's Messiah and Saviour of all, not all will accept him. As was true with other prophets, Jesus' message will spur division.

Anna, whose piety Luke emphasizes, worships, prays, and fasts continually in the Temple. Her wisdom, is suggested by her age, meaning she can be trusted when she proclaims that God's redemption has appeared in the child, Jesus. She shares Simeon's joy and revelation.

We love the story of the Magi, the mystery of the three distant and somewhat exotic guests, but they arrived about two years after the shepherds and angels, yet we make them part of the nativity scene. Because of the beauty and fitness of the Magi's gifts, they became the source of our gift-giving at Christmas. This is what we expect in nativity displays, art work, and Christmas cards.

Now Luke does not mention the Magi. For Luke, there were no kings at Christ's birth, no special star, only ordinary shepherds from Bethlehem, who briefly saw the light of the Angels. Matthew gives us an extraordinary tale, so different from the rest of the gospels. Why does he include this in his gospel? Is it the kings? The gifts? Or the star that he wants to remember? No one else mentions three Wise men. Luke writes of Mary, her determination, her words, her conversation with an angel, her journeys, her lying down in straw to give birth.

Matthew has none of this. Mary does not speak. Joseph is the hero here. He alone encounters an angel, in a dream, determines to take Mary to Bethlehem as his wife. Sentimentality is one of the greatest enemies of the Gospel, and we're most susceptible to this danger at Christmas with the birth story.

Another often skipped-over element of the story is one of fear and opposition that Jesus's birth gives rise to, right from the start. This is the adult story.

Matthew's numberless Magi, or astrologers, or kings arrive without camels in silence. They shine the light of their wisdom on Herod and share their only conversation with him. In his palace and in his conversation, they find no signs at all of wisdom, divinity, purpose, or the glory they are seeking. Quite the opposite. They turn down his requests to accompany them, and refuse to give him any information. Herod does not greet the news of the newborn king with joy.

Why? Perhaps it is because the one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power. Gone from Herod and his court is any notion of the kind of servant leadership prescribed and required by Israel's prophet. Gone is the memory that God placed them in their positions to serve rather than to be served. Herod seeks his own ends and is threatened by even the mere mention of another - another king - a dreaded rival. Devoid of talent, ignorant of his own traditions, and without God's anointing, Herod uses dark arts to keep his throne: terror, savagery and secrets, and the murder of children, for which he is remembered. This birth story is grisly - it is shocking.

Matthew does not shrink from telling us that the coming as well as the going of God from this world are shrouded in violence, intrigue and destruction, and require our courage, risk, and following of small and unexpected lights to guide our way.

Perhaps it is the presence of these Magi, and their quest for God's Messiah announcing that the world is changing, that God is approaching, and that nothing can remain the same in the presence of God's Messiah - that is the root of fear for Herod and the powerful.

The arrival of these wondering astrologers signals that the reach of God's embrace is broadening and that all are included in God's plan for salvation. And now, it is actually happening - all distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions are dissolving. All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next.

Whatever its source and causes, fear is a powerful thing. In response to their fear, Herod, along with the chief priests and scribes, conspire to find the messiah and kill him. They will not succeed this time.

The Magi came to worship Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus and Mary, “they bowed down and worshipped him”, offering him gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Herod tells his confidants that he too wants to worship Jesus, but that’s a lie. Matthew writes that when Herod heard the news of another king, he responded in fear, paranoia, and then infanticide.

Herod “the Great”, as he was known, had been given the title “King of the Jews” in 40 BCE, and after consolidating his power, he ruled over Judea for 33 years. Infamous for his brutality, he would tolerate no rival over his Judean domain. He was so suspicious and insecure that he called a secret meeting of religious leaders and extracted information about the exact time and place of the birth of the new king, Jesus - knowledge that would later prove lethal.

So, how are these stories or events related? What do they have in common? The one thing they have in common is the act of “searching”. Simeon and Anna: they were searching for the Messiah as promised by the prophet Isaiah. Simeon had been waiting patiently, looking at every infant that was brought in for the required rituals. His search was finally ended. He could now die in peace. He had seen the promised Messiah. Simeon’s Epiphany was a revelation to the Israelites.

The Magi are searching for the promised Messiah, the promised king. We don't know how long they had been searching, but Jesus is now a toddler. At long last, their search is over. These Gentiles found the promised one, bowed in front of him and presented him with gifts. They too experienced an Epiphany or revelation. But their revelation was for the Gentiles they represented, as promised by Isaiah.

Herod, too, was searching. Hearing about the promised king, Herod was afraid, along with the rest of Israel. His power was under threat. He just couldn't accept losing his power. So, when the Magi didn't return to Herod on their way back to show Herod where the child could be found, Herod goes on his own search, determined to find this king who threatens his power. So he orders all infants aged two and under to be killed - cruelty and savagery. He has now completed his search. The threat has been eliminated with the slaughter of all the boys aged two and under.

So, are we too searching for the Messiah? Where do we find him? We can find Christ in the face of every person whose path we cross; our neighbour, our co-worker, the homeless man sleeping on the corner; the homeless woman pushing her buggy with all her worldly possessions; the drug addict or alcoholic; the abused spouse and the abuser; the dying friend; the troubled pregnant teenager who has been kicked out of her home; the refugee looking for safety and hope.

The search is not a difficult one, if we only keep our eyes and heart open. Christ is available to each one of us if we just open our eyes and see the need all around us. Our searching is endless as long as we are open to

finding Christ in the lives of our brothers and sisters. Never stop searching for Christ - you will find him always there - always ready to love and guide you - to show you the way.

Amen.