

Sermon at St Margaret's Uniting Church

Rev Dr Barry T Brown

Epiphany 1 – 7th January 2018

[These notes are in précis form rather than verbatim. Prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching', they may not reflect exactly what was preached. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God's Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer's attention. Acknowledgement: The notes that follow include extracts from a sermon by Walter Brueggemann's in his '*Collected Sermons*' - *Missing by Nine Miles*, p192ff].

Introduction

During the past week I have been preparing for a Lay Preacher's Workshop I've been asked to lead in February. The topic of the workshop is – '*Preparing to Preach in 2018: Attending to the Gospels of John and Mark.*' So, my reading and thinking has been about the particular themes and characteristics of those two Gospels.

On Friday afternoon Sarah telephoned to indicate she was not so well and by the end of our conversation it seemed possible I might need to follow-up on my offer to assume leadership, and thus preach today. I realized this would mean a change of thinking as the Gospel reading for Epiphany Sunday is from Matthew. The passage, about the visit of the Magi to the birthplace of Jesus, is told only in Matthew. It is intended to be more than just a Nativity Story. It is part of the introductory section of Matthew's Gospel which identifies the major themes to be unfolded in the longer story that is to follow.

As part of my preparation for the Lay Preacher's Workshop I am planning to commend a book by Morna Hooker – a Methodist local preacher in England and a brilliant New Testament Scholar. Now retired from her professorial chair in Divinity at Cambridge University, Dr Hooker is a Professor Emeritus. She continues to write, teach and exercise her ministry as a Local Preacher. In 1997 she wrote a book titled – *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*. In this study she shows how each of the four Gospels include an introductory section in which the evangelists identify in advance the key themes to be unfolded in their Gospel account. Mark gives a very brief introduction to the action-filled ministry of Jesus and introduces a new literary genre – Gospel, 'good news' – concerning the Kingdom of God. John's Prologue ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...") sets the scene for a very different and reflective account of the life and meaning of Jesus Christ. Both Matthew and Luke, each in their own way, use a Nativity Narrative as a kind of overture. In these narratives the key themes and peculiar characteristics of their Gospels are introduced.

We enjoy our retellings of the Christmas story each year. However, in their retelling we are usually hearing a blended version in which two very different narratives are woven

together, and sometimes sprinkled with a deal of legend and tradition that have crept in that do not appear in either Gospel narrative.

So today, the challenge is try and forget Luke's account for the time being, and listen intently to what Matthew's story is about.

Context is important in this too. Matthew's narrative begins with a lengthy and strange genealogy, which is full of interesting surprises, and deliberately identifies Jesus as a direct descendent of King David and, further back, Abraham. It then tells of the months before the birth of Jesus, from Joseph's perspective, and leaves some questions about Jesus' legitimacy. Nevertheless, Jesus as called Emmanuel (God is with us). Following the birth of Jesus we have today's passage about the visit of the Magi. Then, and this is important, it is followed by threats by Herod against Jesus and his family resulting in their escape to Egypt. Then there is the killing of all boys under 2 years of age, at Herod's command. And the Nativity Narrative concludes with the family returning from Egypt. The careful reader will recognize the link with the story of the faithful Hebrew people, and will be alerted to what Matthew is trying to convey by telling the story the way he does.

With that as background, and as context, let us now consider today's passage (Matthew 2:1 - 12). I want now to hold before you some extracts from a sermon by one of my favourite Biblical commentators – Walter Brueggemann. A couple of years ago, also at short notice, I was called upon to preach at Croydon Uniting Church on Epiphany Sunday (the minister was unwell and not able to take the service). I shared with the Croydon congregation a message including the following extracts from Walter Brueggemann's sermon – *Missing by Nine Miles*.

“The story of the Wise men is well known – no surprise! Gold, Frankincense and myrrh – no surprise! “We three kings of orient are” well known – no surprise! (legendary) !

However, if we read carefully Matthew's text, there are some surprises. eg That some of the details we remember from carols and Christmas cards are not there – but part of additional 'legend' – (Three ! Kings!). And the wise men visit a house, not a stable

But, importantly, if we read even more carefully, we will discover there are some tricky things going on as Matthew deals with texts from the Hebrew Scriptures.

A) The notion of wealthy wise men from the East coming to Jerusalem did not happen for the first time in Matthew. Matthew is drawing on the imagery of Isaiah 60 (which we read this morning). This is an old poem recited to the Jewish people around 580 BCE when, after a couple of generations of exile in Iraq (Babylon), they returned home to a city in ruin – no temple, no towers, a shamble of a place without any visible sign of commerce. Not even a reflection of the great and prosperous city it had once been. To make matters worse, there did not seem to be any prospects for a prosperous future, and nobody seemed to have any idea what to do about it.

In the middle of this depressing and dysfunctional mess was an amazing poet – a man of God with vision and hope, who invited his depressed, discouraged contemporaries to look with hope and expectation for a new city inspired by God. Jerusalem will shine again:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. {2} For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.

Jerusalem will again be a beehive of activity, a place of commerce and rich trade:

*{3} Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...
{5} Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.*

Specifically the poet imagined a city where great camel caravans would gather from around Asia, bringing prosperity and riches:

{6a} A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come (guess where we got the image of camels – not in Matthew's text)...

Even more specifically, they will bring precious and exotic goods, and rare spices:

{6b} They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

There shall be praises to God – for Jerusalem will be wealthy and prosperous and in peace. Isaiah's poem contradicts the dismal reality of ruin and dysfunction.

MATTHEW is reciting again that old hope-filled poem in the form of story. He wants us to assume the wise men, like himself, were familiar with this inspiring poem – found in Isaiah 60. As a result they had arrived at Jerusalem. They knew they were bringing rare spices and precious gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. And they were there, in Jerusalem, to find the new king of peace and prosperity. So Matthew says:

{2:1b - 2}...wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, {2} asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

These wise men had pondered, Matthew surmises, this old poem, and knew what it promised. But, Matthew tells us:

{3} When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

Herod and the people were frightened because a new king would be a threat to the old king, and a threat to the finely negotiated peace in the Roman occupied city. Those who trusted in and benefited from the existing political order were deeply upset of the notion of change – the prospect of a new king and a new order was a threat.

B) Then something strange happened. In a panic, Herod arranged a consultation with the theological college, with the leading Biblical scholars. “Tell me about Isaiah 60. What’s all this about camels - and gold, frankincense and myrrh ?

After a while they came back with the report – “You got the wrong text” ! Isaiah 60 is good in itself, but not in this circumstance. Is 60 is about prosperity, economy, power, prestige for the great city. That’s not these wise men are looking for.

Try another text, try Micah 5:2 – 5.

*² But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days....
⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.*

This text is from a rural peasant, Micah, is of a different kind of hope. It’s not interested in magnificent buildings and busy commerce. Rather, it’s about the well-being of people, ordinary folk. It’s about security and peace.

Not impressed by this himself, King Herod reports what he had been informed to the Eastern sages who immediately set off for Bethlehem – the ancient birthplace of King David, and now the birthplace of the infant Jesus. Pointing to the small unpretentious, out-of-the-way place, mentioned by Micah.

This was the proper place for this unnoticed, uncelebrated peasant birth – of the one who was to offer a deep alternative to the highflying learning of the intellectuals and the arrogant powers of urban might... This new presence in Bethlehem would confound rulers and intellectuals and evoke savage violence from a frenzied Herod. It is no wonder the wise men from the East decided to go home another way.

C) The narrative of Epiphany in Matthew is a story of two texts. *Isaiah 60* offers a dream of city power and prosperity. *Micah* gives its promise of an *alternative future* that is modest but confident. It is a narrative of *two human communities*: *Jerusalem* with its

great pretensions about a future based on wealth and prosperity, and *Bethlehem* with its modest promises known only to the poet.

The narrative of Epiphany is an announcement of two ways of living between which we are forever choosing – a way of seeking power and prosperity; and a way that dreams of an alternative that comes in innocence and in hope and confounds the pretensions that mark the ‘growth economy’ of the ages.

The second ‘*alternative*’ is not about an idealized rural existence at the expense of urban living. It is rather an invitation to receive life given in vulnerability rather than self-sufficiency. No wonder Herod, from his stance, felt the need to crush its possibility.

It is amazing – the true accent of Epiphany – that the wise men did not resist the alternative, but went on to the village as directed. Rather than hesitate or resist, with great courage they recognized their exotic wealth and great learning reoriented their impressive lives to this Little One who is uncredentialed, but who becomes God’s way of newness for the world.

If you know anything about the geography of the Holy Land you will know that Bethlehem is about 16 kilometre south of Jerusalem. Or, better to say, Jerusalem is about 16 kilometres north of Bethlehem. The wise men were learned and well-practiced masters in following the stars. But, they miscalculated by 16 Kilometres and needed some more illuminating re-direction. King Herod thought that his world was the epicenter of life and of a God-given prosperity. The wise men took the time and made the effort to go the extra distance, and saw the wonder of the Little One and offered their gifts. Herod resisted, held on to his rage, and sought to destroy any alternative to himself, and his world, and his dreams of prosperity and gain.

This suggests that that the task before us is to continually choose – between the dreams of vulnerability and peace (Micah) and the self-seeking, self-congratulating desire of wealth and prosperity (Isaiah)

Another way of putting this is to note that the message of this Epiphany is to recognize that most of us, at least some of the time, are looking for life’s meaning and God promises in the wrong places. The invitation of the Epiphany is to be prepared to travel a little further to a place of vulnerability – away from the strivings for self-sufficiency and security in wealth.

Epiphany is a good time to consider the choices, the demands, and the consequences of our choices. The wise men made the choice to travel the extra distance. For Matthew, it is telling, even ironic, that such ‘outsiders’ made the move that those who thought they were at the centre of God’s promises chose to ignore. Epiphany is about seeing anew, making choices, traveling the extra distance, and finding God’s alternative to reshape our destiny. Yes, 16 kilometres off course, but worth the extra travel!