

Christmas 1 – Wesley 10.30am Worship – 29th December 2013

Matthew 2: 1-23 ‘The Christmas story with emphasis on the Magi’

Introduction

Christmas has come and gone and the reading specifically from Matthew’s Gospel for today is the latter part of chapter 2 verses 13-23, the flight of Jesus’ family to Egypt to get away from King Herod’s vengeance. However, I have included the whole chapter as it gives a different perspective to Luke and John’s accounts which have been read on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services this year. There are no shepherds or choirs of angels and the Magi and Herod, with their hugely contrasting attitudes to the birth of Jesus, are the central characters within the story. The tradition of the three kings (is it three, well who really knows?!), the magi who came to Bethlehem, runs deep in many cultures. Carmelo Alvarez writes, “In the Catholic cultures of Latin America and the Caribbean, in countries like Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, the tradition of the magi is incredibly strong. On the eve of the Three Kings Day, on January 5th, children get a shoebox and put fresh grass in the bottom of it. The shoebox is then left under the Christmas tree or under or by your bed. Very early on the morning of January 6th children then go and find their shoebox and lo and behold there are gifts in them left by the Wise Men. The grass is then fed to the stock animals remembering that the Magi would have had to feed their camels. On January 6th there is also a re-enactment of the coming of the magi much like the Nativity plays that we have had in December. In these plays gifts are brought to the Christ child.

It is wonderful to see what different cultures do with different aspects of the Christ birth story. So often we centre on the message to the shepherds and give only a cursory glance to the wise men.

Yet here in Matthew’s account much is made of them.

The Magi and their gifts

Generally the Magi are thought to be astrologers as they obviously were able to read and follow the stars and obviously one star was specifically bright at this time that led them to Jerusalem initially and then on to Bethlehem. They were obviously people of means not purely because of the gifts they brought but because they were able to get an audience with Herod, the ruler of the region. This of course may also have been politically motivated from Herod’s viewpoint as well.

Their gifts were exotic, particularly the myrrh and frankincense.

Myrrh at that time came from a plant found only in southwest Arabia and Northern Somalia. It was the reddish gum oleoresin that was the product harvested from the bush. It had numerous uses in medicine, rituals and even fumigation.

Frankincense likewise comes from a plant. Again this plant is found in southwest Arabia and Northern Somalia. Again this is a resin which is obtained by cutting and incising the trunk of the tree. The exuded sap, white in colour, is left to drop to the base of the tree where it hardens and crystallises. Again it was used in medicines and also as fragrant incense.

The third gift gold, was used as currency from an early time and then used in jewellery and other decorative wares along with being woven into garments. The possession of gold showed wealth and status.

Hence all three gifts were valuable and fit for a king.

The dreams continue

Last Sunday we heard that God spoke to Joseph in a dream. Those dreams continue in today's passage for both Joseph and the Wise Men. The Wise Men do not return to Herod having found the Christ child and return to their country by another route. Again an angel appears to Joseph and warns him to escape the wrath of Herod by fleeing to Egypt. We are unsure how long Joseph, Mary and Jesus were in Egypt but again the angel comes to Joseph and says to go home now that Herod was dead. There is symbolism of the return of the Israelites out of Egypt in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet not all is well and after another dream he takes the family to Nazareth.

These accounts raise the place of dreams in our lives. Not something I have deeply investigated but here a messenger of God offers deliverance through a series of dreams. Possibly something for us to contemplate further.

The killing and the fleeing

Not much has changed even though thousands of years have passed since the massacre in Bethlehem by Herod. All the boys under two were slaughtered as he fought to hang onto his power and eliminate any possible future rival to his ruling bloodline. Not the 'feel good story' of Christmas that many want to celebrate. It came at a huge cost of life and a generation wiped out by a power crazy ruler. We think of Syria, with the huge loss of life but particularly now we are reading about thousands of children killed in this civil war conflict. Thousands of years on the tragedy is the same. The camps in Jordan have tens of thousands of refugees cramming into tent cities, which are beyond our imagination. There are the horrors of genocide on a scale we can't imagine. The killing of innocents with car bombs and IED's in Afghanistan and Iraq to mention but a couple of countries leap out from our televisions nightly. Those fleeing seeking a better life elsewhere and we see just a few here in Australia off planes and leaky vessels.

We complain about the few we see, while hundreds of thousands flee each year from strife in a variety of countries around the world. Today, something like 45 million plus people are living in foreign lands due to conflict in their own countries with physical and political nightmares causing them to flee.

Christ was a refugee and that is something for us to remember in our treatment of others.

The story of Joseph fleeing with Mary and Jesus always makes me think about the Myrrh, Frankincense and gold – is this how they survived in Egypt? Ever wondered about that yourselves? What happened to them in their years in Egypt? We know nothing about this time and I find that a little sad as no doubt it impacted greatly on Mary and Joseph and to some extent Jesus.

Conclusion

In this post-Christmas time let us reflect on the needs of others as we think of all we have been given this Christmas.

I doubt that any of us have gone hungry, none have had to flee the land, few will have been threatened with physical violence, all have had freedom to worship. What an amazing land we live in. May we give thanks and praise to our God. Amen