



7th January 2018

Isaiah 60.1-6

Matthew 2.1-12

When Power Kneels...

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

When we hold our annual All Age Nativity I'm always touched at that moment when the Kings present their gifts – kneeling and removing their crowns as they do so.

It is, I think, a great image.

And images stick in our minds.

Who can forget that picture in 1989 that went around the world of a lone protestor at Tiananmen Square standing courageously before a column of four tanks?

In a sense that's become an iconic example of vulnerability before power.

Our image this morning is, in a way, the opposite way around – of power kneeling before vulnerability as those visitors from the east bow low before a baby.

Bishop Spong says this of our New Testament reading this morning: *The birth story played the role in Matthew's gospel that the overture plays in an opera. The musical themes that would be developed later are introduced in the overture. The overture is filled with hints of things to come.*

So, it's as if, distilled into this one story of the Visit of the Magi, we have a taster of the rest of Matthew's gospel – which is the one before us for most of 2018.

And one way to read this book of the bible is to recognise its Jewish roots. Indeed, it's even been suggested that it actually owes much of its structure to the lectionary readings used in the synagogue week by week.

Many of the followers of Jesus, in those early years after the resurrection, continued with their Jewish heritage and went to synagogue – and when the time came for the sermon they would get up and interpret the readings of the day in the Jesus' tradition. They would make connections, see parallels and form what have become Christian stories around existing Jewish narratives.

Some scholars are convinced that is exactly what is happening here with the visit of the kings. This epiphany tale is one that has its roots in Isaiah 60 with its references to light shining, the arrival of kings alongside those verses about camels, gold and frankincense. All the ingredients for a story we think of as exclusively part of our Christian tradition are to be found already in the Jewish Scriptures.

Even the last gift has an oblique reference, for when Sheba is mentioned most Jews would have immediately recalled the visit of the Queen of that country to Solomon and her gift to him of spices, the prime one of the day being myhhr.

So let's take a brief look this morning at this Christian story that has very deep Jewish roots as Matthew 2 meets up with Isaiah 60.

The opening verses from Isaiah are full of the most beautiful poetry. *Arise, shine for your light has come, on you the Lord shines.* Or how about verse three: *Nations will journey towards your light and kings to your radiance.*

One commentator I read this week said there is almost something 'primal' about the juxtaposition of light and darkness in the human story. It describes our struggles and hopes. It encapsulates our longing and inspires our journey.

And so in the Epiphany narrative there is a star to be followed. In the Transfiguration as Jesus shares a moment with Elijah and Moses, as earth seems to touch heaven, these three shine with the brightness of the sun. And on the morning of resurrection outside an empty tomb, that symbol of hope, the angel's apparel sparkles with a light encrusted brilliance.

The bible even begins with light as the Creation Poem of Genesis talks of its coming into being on the first day and separated into day and night on the second.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has preached many sermons in his 86 years – yet I suspect there is one little saying of his for which many of us are truly grateful and that's when he wrote:

Good is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness and life is stronger than death.

For those first readers and hearers of Isaiah the metaphor of light spoke of the presence of God. Light seemed to symbolise that presence bringing hope and joy.

It's for that reason that the Bible urges us to be people who dwell in the light and value its openness.

Now, Isaiah also speaks of kings, camels, gold and frankincense – vital ingredients for any Nativity Play.

Yet, I wonder, what message this eclectic mix had to offer the people of Isaiah's day, newly back from exile in Babylon, especially with verses 3 and 5 talking of the nations journeying towards the light of Israel and the wealth of the nations being theirs.

Surely, to these people living at the subsistence level of life, struggling to rebuild their society, this is a message of hope. The hope that God's presence at the centre of their community would make them into a nation with a heart for justice, peace and compassion. And that, somehow, they would become a thriving community, respected by neighbours.

Something similar was surely being developed by the synagogue preacher as a new narrative is formed which includes the journey of the powerful and influential from the east, a pilgrimage inspired by the light that is now focused in Jesus.

This is the coming together of both the Jewish and Gentile world around the Christ child. This is the joining of both the rich and the poor at the manger.

The very presence of wise men from the east, priestly astrologers who had almost prince like status, who seem to have open access to the throne rooms of Persia and Jerusalem – this was an inclusive presence in the Jesus' story making the profound statement that the love and light at the centre of the Gospel is for all nations and never limited by birth, status or nationality.

But what, I wonder, can the story of the kings say to us today, during Epiphany 2018?

As I have contemplated this image over recent days I cannot get out of my mind that this was a moment when power knelt before vulnerability.

Of course, you'd be entitled to read it differently as temporal power kneeling before divine power. But this year I've been drawn to a different interpretation.

Who do the kings, priests, magi, wise men (call them what you will) – who do these powerful people kneel before in the story? They kneel before a baby, a small vulnerable, speechless child.

And isn't that a deeply precious and profound image.

For it's when we look into the face a baby that our heart warms with the appreciation of a new life joining us.

It's when we look into the face of a young child that we see the vulnerability that characterises our humanity and makes for a common bond between us.

It's when we see that Holy Family, protecting each other, looking out for one another that we see the value and worth of life and community.

Before all this – power kneels.

Because power needs to kneel because authority and wealth if used exclusively for the one who wields it can corrupt rather than liberate.

Yet power, money or influence that is used generously for others to value life, to celebrate humanity and to recognise the worth of others makes us twice blessed.

The kings knelt – and in that moment discovered and expressed their common humanity with this poor and vulnerable family lodged in a Bethlehem backstreet.

On Christmas Day, in her broadcast, The Queen reflected on a visit she made to Manchester after the Arena bombing. She met survivors recovering in hospital and made small talk with them at the bottom of their beds. Elizabeth the Second, one of the most famous individuals on the planet, said the visit to that hospital was for her a 'privilege'. In such a visit there is the essence of certain sort of power willingly, with a wise heart, paying homage to the courage and fortitude found in vulnerability.

Twelve months stretches out before us and perhaps nothing defines us more than the way we use our power, our money, our place and influence.

To temper power with compassion, to use money for the benefit of others, to exert influence with a generosity of spirit – this is to live a connected life based on the dignity of being a fellow human being in community.

When such communities are formed it's as if the star shines once more over the stable and kings are drawn yet again by its radiance.

May it be so for us in 2018 in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 5th January 2018