



The Epiphany

THE NEW SHOFAR

Take the Gospel to the "very ends of the earth"!

Isaiah 60:1-6 - Matthew 2:1-12

January 7th, 2018

God is aware of what is happening in our world

In what ways are our parish life and personal spiritual life going to be different in 2018? What areas do we need Spirit-driven efforts to be made?

What are our priorities for the New Year and where to the poor and needy fit?

New Year's Day was a little different around Linton this year and events did make me pause and ponder lots of things in the light of my understanding of the Gospel. At 4am New Year's Day, a fire burned down a house in a little town by the name of Snake Valley. Then, at 4pm on the same day, we were called to another house fire, this time in Skipton. That house too was lost. Those terrible experiences seemed very much at odds with the experiences being shared by those on the back of the firetruck, stories of great parties, fireworks and happiness for the opening of a New Year. And this is to say nothing of even more tragic events all around the globe and here in our own wonderful country. If 2018 is to be a "new" year in every way, what is it we Christians need to be doing? Is it possible for us to continue to block out the cries of anguish, need, frustration and pain that echoes from all areas of life and instead concentrate on our own concerns?

The Message of the Epiphany - God is speaking to us

Matthew here continues with his overall presentation of the birth of Jesus as being an event filled with the miraculous intervention of God. There is a note of joy written into the events and it had long been held that the coming of the Messiah would bring heavenly joy to the world. It is about God reminding all men and women that in this Christ-child, heaven and earth are united in a way that has not been previously experienced. God, the Creator and Redeemer of all, has not lost sight of the cries of the poor and needy of the earth. The evangelist goes on to point out that this child is no ordinary baby, one of the many born in Bethlehem at the time. His birth is marked by the arrival of mysterious men from the east – indeed all the earth is responding to our needs.

Whatever of their origins, they represent Gentiles who have come to Jerusalem, the city of the Jews, to worship their new king. They stand in contrast to the Jews of the land who are mystified as to the coming of their long-awaited Messiah. All they can see are stars in the skies. These Magi see the same stars and speak of a King. Instead of rejoicing, the earthly King Herod (representing all those men and women closed to any new divine action on earth) interprets this as a challenge to his own comfortable existence, his power and his position in the community. The foreigners worship the messiah while the Jews (represented by the priests, scribes and people) reject him. For Matthew this is an important point as he speaks to his own Church, a Church that has been rejected by the Jews, thrown out of the synagogues and were undergoing persecution. For the evangelist, a sign of a faithful Church will be the suffering, rejection and struggles that come through a faithful preaching of the Gospel to an indifferent and sometimes hostile world.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghgod.com

The time to respond is very much the present moment

The evangelist is pointing out that such realities were a part of the life of Jesus from the very beginning. Another important message from Matthew in this story is that with the arrival of the messiah decisions need to be made. He is to be accepted or rejected. The Gentiles accept him while the Jews reject him. The challenge then for the Church of Matthew's time (and for the Church of every time) – is to have faith and follow Jesus or reject God's invitation and pursue alternative pathways to life. There can be no position of indifference in the eyes of God.

Finally, throughout the whole of this passage, there is the ongoing theme of the overwhelming presence of God with all the power and might of heaven. The Magi are mysteriously following a God-sent star. The child is born in Bethlehem, the home of David and will so come to fulfil all the promises made by God to Israel in the past. There is a constancy of divine providence throughout the story. For Matthew, there is the same constancy of divine presence throughout the whole of human history – in and through Jesus Christ. Herod, the chief priests, the Pharisees, Sadducees, the scribes and the people of Jerusalem see the same things and either see nothing or turn hostile at the possible threats to their comfortable religion.

Matthew has very little in the way of a Christmas story, leaving the details and specifics to Luke. For him the most important thing is the meaning of the birth of the messiah Jesus. In his genealogy he has included Gentiles and now he has foreigners, Magi, travelling great distances to worship this new king. There is something quite powerful in this simple recounting of what happened. For him it means that nothing is impossible for God. Even more, God surmounts all barriers – in the case of Jesus born of Mary and the presence of the Magi – even significant racial limitations, moral barriers and the difficulties of history (a Jewish king born under Roman imperial rule). Despite all the problems, the promises that God made long ago are now starting to be fulfilled. Mary may well have been going against the established moral code of her day but was reassured in her actions through the grace of God. The Magi had no idea as to the promises made to the Jews and yet they had travelled vast distances, across hostile lands in order to worship this king. For Matthew, this is where the grace of God is shown to be the most important element in human life.

We are given the example of Herod. He is a powerful king. He is rich, influential and well able to determine his own future and the future of his subjects. And yet, for all of this, he is unable to change the plans of God. While Caesar is reigning supreme in faraway Rome, God is raising up the King of Kings in remote Bethlehem. The Scribes, Priests and the *people of Jerusalem* are so busy searching the scriptures to find their own hopes being fulfilled and unfolding around them and yet miss the great and wonderful work of God.

We are invited to choose God as the foundation of our lives. It is then by walking in his ways (as mapped out for us by Jesus) that we will be given the wisdom we need to find his enduring peace, love, mercy, forgiveness, healing and the never-ending opportunity for new life and new beginnings. We will in Christ overcome all difficulties and obstacles to life. Where do we find these divine gifts? He is to be found in all things in our lives. This is the Christmas message. Not that Jesus was born so long ago but that Jesus, having been born in Bethlehem, is now alive in all peoples, who like the Magi, make the effort and sacrifice to search for him and live in union with him. For the world around us, a world searching for some light and hope in 2018, God has given us key roles as Christ's collaborators. If we begin 2018 in Christ, God's Church will grow.