

# Sunday 6 January 2008: Epiphany

## Opening doors

**Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

*Here is the little door, lift up the latch, O lift!*

Recently, the Egyptian government announced their intention to pass a law requiring royalties to be paid whenever copies are made of some of the ancient monuments such as the pyramids. As proprietors of themed resorts the world over threw up their hands in horror, the chair of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities stated that the law was an attempt to control commercial use of some of the most iconic buildings of the ancient world. In an amusing twist, he said that reproductions that are not exact replicas would be exempt, so Mr. Hawass said that the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas was unaffected as "it was not an exact copy of a pyramid and its interior was completely different" – which I'm sure is something of a relief both to the hotel guests and the eternal souls of Egyptian pharaohs!

Listening to all of that, it struck me how easy it is to pay lip service to the wonder of other cultures and histories, without ever fully engaging with the mystery or the otherness of that culture. It's not a new phenomenon – in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a wave of Turkish mania swept central Europe prompting Mozart to respond to the commercial possibilities with a Turkish opera and a rather contrived attempt to reproduce the sound of Turkish instruments on the piano – though I have to admit that the result of those endeavours was rather more sublime than a visit to PyramidWorld!

Matthew's account of the mysterious visitors from the East who visit the infant King and incur the wrath of the ruling monarch, Herod, is so familiar that it's almost in danger of becoming a phenomenon called "Magi-World". Thankfully, a bit like the Luxor hotel, when you get inside the story, it doesn't look anything like a theme park and instead challenges all the easy expectations of the familiar. It challenges us to engage with these mysterious visitors, the gifts they offer, and the insights they bring.

It's an ongoing wonder to me that it's Matthew Gospel that includes this story of the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles. Matthew, the Gospel aimed most obviously at a Jewish Christian community; the Gospel most concerned with the figure of Jesus as the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospel that says that not one letter will pass from the Jewish laws until all is fulfilled; the Gospel where the disciple are told to focus their mission on the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And yet this story of the Gentile visitors who recognise the present reality of "God with us" in the child of Bethlehem finds its echo at the end of Matthew's Gospel when the risen Christ promises to be God with us to all eternity and who sends his followers to proclaim that truth to all nations.

I'm fascinated by Matthew's willingness to step outside his comfort zone and recognise that the revelation of God is never confined by our own expectations. Like most of us, it's a tension that he never quite resolves – and he can't quite bring himself not to use the word Gentile as the ultimate put-down. But with his eye honed to the fulfilment of the scriptures,

Matthew would know that the history of Israel is liberally sprinkled with Gentile visitors who bring their gifts and in so doing open another door of insight into the unfolding story of God-with-us.

In the book of Genesis, there's the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, the priestly King of unexplained origin who blesses Abram and brings him bread and wine. Go to the British Museum and you'll see there the Cyrus cylinder – a carved clay cylinder which is testament to another King – Cyrus of Persia whose actions opened the door for the return of the Israelites from captivity – the cylinder records the decree of King Cyrus himself, granting that freedom to the people of Israel.

There's the Queen of Sheba with her laden camel train bearing gold and spices, and what the NRSV calls the “hard questions” with which to test Solomon. And then there's the insights of the later Isaiah who sees in that visit, not just the glory of Solomon, but the revelation of the glory of God in the wisdom of his anointed one.

*But the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*Here is the little door, lift up the latch, O lift!*

Matthew's mysterious Eastern visitors and their equally mysterious gifts stand in a long Biblical line. The traditional interpretation of the gifts the wise men brought tells us that in gold we see the authority of Kingship; incense represents the priesthood, brought to new perfection in Christ; myrrh, the power of redemptive suffering made visible in the cross of Christ. Reflecting again on those symbolic gifts, it's left me wondering who in this story was giving and who receiving. The wise men were brought to a revelation they could never have expected – but I pondered, was the child Jesus also to receive insights he could not have expected? Was it those insights which enabled that Biblical line of strangers opening unexpected doors continue in the life of Jesus himself? I couldn't help thinking of the encounter between Jesus and the Syro-phoenician woman with her terrific one-liner about the dogs eating the master's crumbs. Could we dare to believe that in that woman we see an act of authority, a costly suffering and an expression of priestliness that was to shake the very human prejudices of Jesus himself and allow Jesus to embrace the very revelation of God-with-us that he embodies? Was it the receiving of the wise men, not as quaintly exotic visitors, but as the gifts of God himself that opened that unexpected door for Jesus?

Last week, as I pondered whether to make any New Year's resolutions this time round, the thought of insights from unexpected quarters prompted one or two ideas. It struck me how many times the most moving, inspiring, insightful and challenging examples of authority, priestliness and redemptive suffering reveal themselves not in the traditional channels but in the people for whom churchiness can be foreign and alienating. Recently reading a series of biographies of some of the giants of the world of science, it struck me how much the wisdom and gifts of the apparently secular world speak to me of God in profound ways that I sometimes struggle to find in what's more traditionally labelled as 'spirituality'.

Perhaps, I wondered, my new year's resolution should be to not to read anything that calls itself theology, and definitely nothing that has the word “church” in the title but to try to embrace as broad a range of disciplines as possible, and to accept the gifts they bring as opening new doors into the story of God-with-us.

My previous history tells me that this resolution is likely to go the way of most of the others I've made, and in a way that's probably right. Because I don't think it's the "ology" that is the issue – it's the willingness to accept the gifts of others in whatever form they come. It's about not cheapening or diminishing the insights that difference brings, but believing those differences to be gifts offered to us as a revelation of God-with-us. If this season of Epiphany is about anything, it's about open eyes, open hearts, open lives – it's about recognising the brightness of unexpected dawns, of eyes lifted to look around. It's often recognising the doors that are opened for us in the unexpected revelations of authority, priestliness and redemptive suffering that are part of daily life – and of thankfulness that in such things we can enter into the presence of the one who is God-with-us to all eternity.

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