

Epiphany, Year A  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 8, 2016  
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In our reading this morning from Isaiah we hear three things that undoubtedly inspired Matthew as he composed the story of the visit of the Magi to Jesus in Bethlehem. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” We then hear that “Nations shall come to your light, and Kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Finally we hear those who come will bring “gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

I have said this many times before, and I will say it many more times before I retire, because I believe it is crucial; the Jewish hope expressed over and over in the Bible is that at last, in the fullness of time, the God of the Jews will be shown to be the God of the entire world, the entire universe. Isaiah expresses that hope in the passage we just heard and I just cited. Matthew writes the story of the Magi to declare that this hope has, in Jesus, at last been fulfilled.

If we want to know what Matthew is doing here, he is doing that. Jesus has brought the God of the Jews to everyone. This doesn't mean that everyone becomes Jewish, that notion would have made no sense in a world in which religion, strictly speaking, was different than we think of it today. It wasn't about belief, it was about culture, country, empire. So what Matthew, and Isaiah before him meant is that regardless of where you live, what your culture is, who

is king, the God of Jesus, the God of the Jews, will be seen as the God of all. In the economy of God, no one religion in the formal sense wins out over the others, rather, it is that all come to see that this one God ultimately transcends all particular expressions of faith, this one God is above and beyond all religions, all cultures, all ethnicities, all the ways we divide ourselves up. The ethical implication of this sort of truly radical monotheism is not homogenizing humanity; it is the uniting of humanity in its remarkable and wonderful diversity.

We see this ethical implication in our psalm. This one God, the God of all, the one that “All the kings shall bow down before,” will bring justice to everyone, delivering the poor, pitying the lowly, preserving the lives of the needy. This one God will redeem all lives from oppression and violence, and “dear” shall be the blood of all people in this God’s sight.

What we need to understand, and often don’t, is that just as this one God transcends Judaism, so too does this one God transcend Islam, Hinduism and – may I say it? – Christianity. We too bow down before him, not as those who claim special privilege because we are Christian, but precisely because we abandon any claim to special privilege before this one God who is over all. That is really hard for most of us who are Christian to understand, even as it is really hard for those of all other faiths to understand. But if we now know that the God of the Jews isn’t Jewish, but transcends Judaism, can we not see that the God of the Christians is not a Christian? And that this is not a bad thing, but a good

thing, the very best thing in fact because only when we have realized that can we proclaim the real truth of the story of the visit of the Magi. Indeed, only when the world realizes that the one God of all is above all can the hope for that peace which our psalm proclaims begin to be realized. Only when people surrender not to one another in a dance of the victor and the vanquished, but when all people surrender together as one to the one God over all, only then will the hope we see in scripture begin to be fulfilled.

In the passage from the letter to the Ephesians we just heard the same theme is developed in a different way. There we hear of a “mystery” that had not been previously revealed to the world, but which has now been made known. The mystery is that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.” In Jesus we are brought into the life and grace of the God of the Jews; we are “fellow heirs.” Notice this carefully, because it is the complete repudiation of a disastrous and ultimately deadly error. Through Jesus the Gentiles - and that is all of us here - do not replace the Jews in God’s heart and covenant, we join them as “fellow heirs.” Jews belong to the Covenant of God, says this letter, and in Jesus we find that everyone else does too. God’s love is for all, God’s salvation is for all, God’s justice and peace is for all regardless of whether or not you are Jew or Gentile, because God is not Jewish, and God is not Gentile. God is God, and God alone.

That is the story Matthew is telling, or rather, that is the truth Matthew is proclaiming in his story of the visit of the Magi to the stable in Bethlehem. If you believe that, then you believe this story is true, regardless of whether or not you believe this story is historical or not. I do not, by the way, believe it is historical, but I do believe it is true because I accept the claim it makes upon me and upon the world. But if you don't believe that the one God transcends and rules all, then you don't believe this story, again, regardless of whether or not you think it is historical.

None of this means that we might as well abandon our faith for the sake of some sort of generic presentation that attempts to embrace all spirits. That is a mistake a lot of people I know make. Rather, this means that we are called to practice and proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ in a particular way. In a world that has long been darkened by the insistence on finding divisions that justify all sorts of oppression and violence, to proclaim Christ is to proclaim the essential unity of all people, a unity that transcends every division because it seeks to worship the God who is above and beyond all division. We are not called to preach Christ in order to make people happy now and avoid hell later. That kind of proclaiming simply fosters further division, and it isn't true. Instead, proclaim Christ as the Image of the God who is above all images, just as the Mosaic Law proclaims the God who is above all laws.

We have good news, folks, news that this world needs to hear, news that on the whole the world does not yet believe, but which is nevertheless true;

everything is bound up in God, all people, cultures, races, creeds, nationalities, whatever. We know that because of what God did in Jesus Christ. And Jesus did not come to tell us to become Christian or be lost forever. Jesus came to point us to the God who is All in All. For us that means submitting our own Christianity to the rule of God, and inspired by that, using it not as a further means of dividing the world, but offering it to God that God might unite the world not in one single religion, but in unity of purpose, made real by the sort of justice and compassion our psalmist celebrates this morning.

This morning we are baptizing Theodore True, the son of Patrick and Anna True, and the great grandson of Martha True, one of the true pillars of this Cathedral. All four of our lessons today provide us with the ideal context in which to do this. We are baptizing Theodore into a body - the Body of Christ here on earth - which has been called into being by God in order to proclaim and incarnate the truth of the essential unity of all people before the one God who is above and beyond all the ways people preserve divisions. Throughout his life he will be tempted by this world to find his importance and value in those divisions, and throughout his life God will continue to recall him to the truth, that his true value, his true importance, is to be found within that unity which is God's gift to the whole world. And God will continue to call him throughout his life to live out the implications of that unity. It is the duty of those who raise him to adulthood first to find themselves in that unity, and then to instill in him that same sense of where his true self lies, so that he will be open to the call of God,

and empowered to live it out. It hardly need be said that God calls us all in the same way. For that is the plainest meaning of the story of the visit of the Magi, it is the plainest sense of Isaiah's expression of hope for a new world, it is the means by which the justice, mercy and compassion of God can be realized in the way our psalmist declares, it is the "mystery" the letter to the Ephesians reveals and celebrates.