

Epiphany 1 2015 Titirangi

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Ephesians 3: 1-12, Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matt 2: 1-12

You may have observed when travelling that there are those who manage with a small backpack into which a few items of continually recycled clothing have been tossed plus a toilet bag and a couple of books on which they circulate the globe.

Others, however, seem to need not only a walk-in wardrobe packed into a dozen cases, but highly specialized and odd-shaped packages to contain the evening wear and a collection of dress suits plus a chemist's shop collection of body-care add-ons. All this to cross the road, let alone embark on a world trip.

We all have differing ideas of essentials. I wouldn't travel anywhere without a small toolbox and at least half-a-dozen books plus some means of writing down my adventures – these days usually it's my lap-top, although I'm confidently assured by my young nieces and nephews that this is very old-fashioned, especially as it's seven years old which they see as belonging to the dinosaur era.

So when we read in the often very economical use of words that 'wise men came from the East' there is a great deal that's not said.

It's most likely they came from Persia, now modern-day Iran and were part of what we would now call a university – a school of advanced students of history, philosophy, medicine and astronomy/astrology. Astrology was not what you find in the weekly gossys or the newspaper, where if you read four or five learned expositions you'll get at least half a dozen answers – all different. The wise men studied the stars to learn about creation and the development of life in the heavens and on earth. Their discovery of a new and moving star would be packed with meaning for them.

It's clear that they were in positions of power and considerable wealth – free to study and free to travel long distances. Their entourage would be akin to that of the President of the United States, whom we occasionally see on the move with a cavalcade of large cars, motorcycle outriders along with security men in their intimidating dark suits, dark glasses and even darker expressions that make our multiple suitcase traveler seem very modestly equipped. So, they have traveled over time and distance by camel and horse with all the equipment and staff required to keep these men in the style to which they were accustomed.

Their first call is as we would expect of such notables – on King Herod the Great – a man alternating between great generosity and extreme paranoia.

As he died in 4 B.C. Herod the Great gives us a clue to the birth year of Jesus.

When the wise men arrived Herod would at first have been suitably impressed with such grandeur arriving for a social call – and not too happy to find that they sought only information and on a matter guaranteed to set his alarm bells ringing – which is why he asked the wise men to return and tell him where this child was so that he could go and worship him also.

This was not because he needed to know – he would have ensured his spies kept him informed – but because there was no way these wise ones would be allowed to escape to tell their amazing story.

However, Herod was genuinely paranoid - murdering rivals, real or imagined. He murdered his wife Mariamne, his mother and three of his sons.

Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, once said that it was safer to be Herod's pig (Greek: *hus*) than Herod's son (Greek: *huios*).

The Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2: 16-18), modelled after Pharaoh's killing of Israelite babies (Exodus 2: 1-10), is thus very much in keeping with Herod's character.

*Most significantly, the wise men are Gentiles. Matthew's Gospel is highly focussed towards a Jewish audience, but he introduces these Gentile worshipers at the beginning, preparing us for Jesus' last words to his disciples, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations"** (28: 19 - the Greek word translated 'nations' is *ethne*, which also means 'Gentiles').

On New Year's Eve I walked the lovely Tahunanui beach with one of my daughters and a niece. We were drawn to Nelson following the death of Joyce's brother Keith. We had all experienced the sudden change of end of year plans with the rush, communicating with everyone, travelling - this was no wise men's journey - the planning, accommodation, the service, food and the care of those directly affected. Now three of us walked the beach on a calm, brilliantly moonlit night after a day of high winds and heavy rain.

I thought of Isaiah's words that opened our readings today.

Arise! Shine! For your light has come; the glory of the Lord rises upon you. Darkness covers the earth, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

After the darkness of death you don't expect light to shine yet it did and it does for the light of God is not bound by darkness and there before us, reflected from the sea, light in soft gentle warmth radiated God's light over us all.

There shone the evening star, Venus, with the Southern Cross reminding us of Jesus, light of the world radiating hope for our battered planet, hanging precariously in space.

We have an ironic contrast between these Gentiles, who using their knowledge of the heavens and reflections on life without the Hebrew scriptures follow the star to Jesus, fall down and worship him, rejoicing that they have found their saviour; opposing them, the chief priests and scribes, who know the scriptures right down to the relevant words to locate Jesus' birthplace, who correctly direct their Gentile visitors along to him, but who do nothing to seek out their Messiah, who is but five miles away in Bethlehem (v. 5). The deeply religious can't see him because of their religious bigotries, their love of all as it is, while the pagans from afar eagerly seek him out, find and worship him.

Is there a New Year message for us that we not be so heavenly spiritual that we are of no earthly use? And that we be not so heavily pre-programmed for what we want to see that we miss out on the truth that God seeks to reveal to us?

When Paul sets out his faith statement in his letter to the church at Ephesus he draws attention to his own dramatic conversion from an active persecutor of Christians to a most enthusiastic evangelist and administrator, caring for little church communities all over the Middle-east. We often find it hard to wonder why there is so much emphasis in the New Testament on the fact of God's embrace of all peoples of all nations, classes and cultures within the one fold. It was simply unheard of in his time. People held to the absolute superiority of their own race and religion, regarding all others as at least derogatory and at worst totally evil, so to gather together Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women in one association of equals was a massive change for the new church communities to adjust to. They were also practically focussed, creating their own social welfare department to collect and distribute resources to those in need. These Christian communities were so unlike those around them that they became for some folk beacons of welcome and acceptance and for others threats to the existing social and religious order and thus targets for persecution.

The New Testament is a season of New Years as these foundling churches establish themselves.

When we look at the outstanding work of the early missionaries in this nation Kendall, Hall and King and their incredibly courageous families, later, Colenso and the Williams family, to name but two, especially the women who endured horrendous hardships in appalling housing and sometimes without an English-speaking companion for months on end while bearing many children, teaching in the new schools and coping with inter-tribal wars.

So 200 years later what will we wish for in the new year 2015?

I invite you to turn to your neighbours and tell them what you would wish for them, for it is certain that the greatest blessings come to us when we are engaged with others in supportive and affirming friendships.

So in conclusion may we all be found in wonder and worship, in freedom and grace, embracing the love of God and of each other throughout the whole of the year before us.