Sermon

Epiphany Year A

5/1/20

Eltham

**Readings**

**OT:** Isaiah 60:1-9

**Psalm:** Psalm 72

**NT:** Ephesians 3:1-12

**Gospel:** Matthew 2:1-12

+FSHS

It seems somewhat crass to be celebrating Epiphany, the feast of light, when overshadowed with dark clouds of smoke, and a reddish haze that turns the sun’s aureole to blood, when we’ve all seen on the news the apocalyptic scenes of the last week: pitch black in Mallacoota in the middle of the day; blood red at other times; the incredible footage of flames 40 metres high, and bushfires so severe they create their own weather complete with lightning and thunder. In the midst of all this we remember wise people from the East coming to pay a visit to a special child. This, at a time when many of us are wondering about what the future might hold for our children’s children’s children, and not feeling like there’s a hell of a lot to celebrate about. In the background is our own fear: the fires started in September, and have been making their way down the coast: are we next?

What do gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh mean in the face of such horror and fear? I mean, frankincense and myrrh these days are used largely for burning as incense – which is just a little inappropriate at this time. I suppose the gold – if it were real gold – could go towards fundraising for the firies, and for those who have lost everything to the flames. But the gifts of the magi this year seem out of place and out of time.

Perhaps we’re not as distant from first century Palestine as we like to think. Or as the sanitized, Christmas-card version of three figures and their camel embossed in gold leaf might make us think. Matthew’s narrative is full of jagged nuggets: the magi probably weren’t three in number, but a whole retinue of male and female practitioners of Zoroastrianism. They were Gentiles intruding in a Jewish story, although the psalms and various prophecies suggest that kings of the east would offer gold and precious spices as tribute when the kingdom of Israel was restored. Then there’s the question: what’s with the two year delay, guys? Was it politics and the faffing about of government process which meant a two year delay between their observation of astrological phenomena and getting on their camels to make the trip? To say nothing of the complete balls-up of them having gone to the ruling powers of Judaea, who engaged in subterfuge (“tell me where he is so I can worship too”) and then all out violence and genocide in killing all male children under 2. Matthew ascribes significance to this as a reference to Moses’ origins in Egypt, and the dictum of another corrupt ruler who orders the death of male babies, making the connection in multiple ways between Jesus and Moses. Later, Joseph and Mary and the baby flee to Egypt, so that the prophecy “Out of Egypt I called my Son” could be fulfilled. There’s the issue of the gifts to which we attach all kinds of significance and spiritual meanings, but at base line aren’t terribly practical (what happened to the gold when Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt? What use was myrrh and frankincense to them as refugees? Did they flog it along the way for a bit of extra cash?). And in the background is the fact all this takes place in an occupied country under foreign political rule. All of this drama sounds a lot like things that go on in the world today: displaced refugees, wars, military dictatorships, foreign interference of various types, the constant vying for power among certain world leaders, and closer to home, the mismanagement of resources, the consistent denial of any need to respond to changing climatic conditions, leaders who show indifference and a lack of comprehension of the suffering of those who have lost everything.

Maybe Epiphany is exactly what we need at this time of dread and fear, pain and loss. Because it is a potent reminder that in our vulnerability, God is most present. When the mouth of firey hell threatens – God is present in our fear, in the pain suffering and death, in the annihilation and devastation and loss. God has lived it all, God-in-flesh, God-with-us, knows first hand what it is to suffer and die and feel helpless. The gold and frankincense and myrrh remind us that God’s kingship is not as a Zeus or Jupiter hurling thunderbolts from Mount Olympus, demanding blood sacrifice to appease wrath – God’s kingship is as Creator who made all, loves all, is in all, gives life to all, who loved creation so much as to become one with it. So that God’s heart could beat alongside the heart of our Earth, alongside the heart of every creature, alongside the blackened hearts of humans twisted charred and scarred by sin, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, rage, avarice and pride. Jesus’ death, the pouring out of his life and his blood, is so fundamentally about God’s life becoming our life, our life being united with God’s life. Our fleshy, scary, bodily, out-of-control, fear-driven lives one with his. And he comes to us as the one who speaks peace, the one who continues to give life, whose heart bleeds where evil and terror and death seem to triumph, and whose same life-giving creates new life, and brings green shoots from the ashes, whose life-giving inspires in the midst of horror acts of kindness and compassion. What kind of God does that? What kind of God chooses to become one with this life of ours?

Well do we fall on our knees with the wise folk of the East, in the midst of all the ambiguity of whether that falling to our knees is in an agony of soul and a plea for mercy and for rain and for an end of human greed and corruption, or whether it is in adoration of this God who has not abandoned us in the midst of our greed and corruption, but takes it on, becomes one with us. This God who is not afraid to be vulnerable, and to show us that the way forward is not to rail against heaven with clenched fists, and nor is it to clamp down in fear what we have, or our nation’s borders, or our attitudes to politicians with iron clamps, but rather to embrace this place of raw vulnerability and find here that true power is power shared, given, donated, passing through our hands, not held tightly by us. True power is that which is used for the life of the other, and which starts not with the barrel of a gun (or a nuclear missile), but with a baby with permeable fragile flesh. This God comes closer to us than our own breath and whispers new life. This God’s very presence makes reality shimmer, disintegrate, and reform, transformed and renewed so that it once more bears the likeness of God. This God’s motivation is hope, and this God’s power is the power of redemption, the power of life itself which laughs ultimately in the face of death, decay and destruction with abundance. This God’s power sweeps away greed and corruption, tearing down the mighty from their thrones and raising up the humble and meek. This is our God. This is our God come close to us in the Baby of Bethlehem, in Jesus the Christ. This is the God we worship and in whose service we are bound with perfect freedom.

That’s also what the gold, frankincense and myrrh remind us of this day. That we are invited to be one with the Christ-child, to hear and feel our hearts beat alongside his, right here, and to know that the blood in our veins runs in his. And that we are not people of despair and darkness, for the light shines in us – it’s in our blood. And that means that our blood too must flow through the world, for we are part of God’s life-giving for the world. Transformed by encounter with Emmanuel, given God’s own heart of compassion, we too go forth to be transformers. You know what a transformer does: it takes energy and refines and repurposes it, redirects it. The Child the wise folk visited transforms us, and transforms all that is, taking what is negative, what is dark, what is destined for death, and making all things new. Let us pray that we may be transformed in our encounter with Christ in the year ahead, and so be part of God’s transformation of the world.

**Dancing to the beat of God’s heart 2020**

God of love,

Your compassion for people knows no bounds.

Give us grace that we may know

the presence of Jesus in us and with us:

in words of scripture,

in water, bread and wine,

in the face of each other.

Transform our lives by your Spirit

and give us your heart of compassion,

so that we may make the transforming love of Christ known to all. **Amen**.

The Lord be with you

**And also with you.**