



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 60: 1-6,9
Second Reading Ephesians 3: 1-12
Gospel Matthew 2: 1-12

Today is the feast of the Three Kings. Scripture nowhere tells us that they were kings, nor even that there were three of them: both of those things are fancifully inferred either from other Bible verses or else from the number of the gifts that are listed. But today I am going to talk a bit about the deeper significance of the story that is the basis of today's Gospel and the symbolic message it tells us about how other religions prepared the way for the revelation of Christ, and were fulfilled by it.

Herod, of course, is an historical figure, and just as murderous and paranoid as he appears in Matthew. The magi, as they are called, were a school of mystics and astrologers who plied their craft in the ancient Middle East. Significantly, they seem to have been active in places we now call Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan—all of them names from today's headlines. The magi were neither Jewish nor Christian. Some were probably followers of Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra. That religion shares with our biblical tradition a faith in an all-powerful God, but also suggests a cosmic battle being waged between the forces of good and evil, personified by two semi-gods who were always at war. Intermediary beings assisted human beings in their part of this war, and they seem to have been the origin of the later Jewish concept of angels that we as Christians have inherited, and perhaps even our idea of Satan as the focus of all evil and God's greatest enemy.

That the magi are said by Matthew to have searched the heavens and received a sign of the divine birth is an obvious choice on the author's part if he wants his readers to appreciate how the whole world, not just Jewish tradition, could appreciate the birth of the Messiah. After all, until Christianity, the Messiah was only a Jewish figure, send to his people alone. By having Persian or Afghani wizards visit the Baby Jesus, Matthew makes the point that all nations are invited to call Him Lord. But there is something else, too: the Gospel from Matthew suggests that other religious traditions can, each in its own way, prepare the way for Christ.

This is a rather controversial thing to say- most early Christian writers took a very dim view of the world of pagan religion and philosophy. Only the God of Israel and the witness of Judaism were seen as being chosen by God as a vehicle of truth. And yet here in the Christmas message of Matthew, it isn't priests from the Temple in Jerusalem who seek Jesus out, but wise men of a totally different religious background altogether. Clearly, something special- something universal is being implied here including, perhaps, the invitation to consider that God may have revealed Himself to others outside of our Jewish-Christian family.

I myself have found great merit in the study of the great religions that prefigured our own: the still-valid teachings of our elder sister Judaism, but also the teachings on compassion of the Buddha, the mysticism of Sufi Islam, the ethical precepts of Kongfuzi: Confucius, or the respect for nature of the Native Americans. These things nourished the souls of countless people before the advent of Christian evangelism taught a newer, fuller view of God and God's plan. In many ways, they prepared the way much as the prophets of our own Old Testament did for the Jews.

But what happens when healthy respect becomes imitation? American Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts-Shori has frequently been criticized by the conservative church press as saying that Jesus is only "*one* of the ways" to God. A woman priest in the U.S. even claimed to be both Christian and Moslem. To try to combine many traditions into one is called *syncretism*. It sounds very open-minded and inclusive- just what people want to hear today. But it runs the very real risk of watering down

the demands of the Gospel or of compromising the uniqueness of Jesus for the sake of being seen as affirming of a common, human spirituality. But is it true to the Christian faith?

Despite my study of other religious traditions, I am not a syncretist. The dangers of trying to mix and match religions are many. Some of them are so subtle that we don't notice them. We no longer bat an eye when a church-going friend or relative tells us that he or she is also "into" crystals, reincarnation or Zen. The Church is so worried about losing more members that it keeps silent rather than giving witness to its own teachings.

The forced blending of religions is something that I face all the time. I will take a stronger, braver rector than I to confront the fact that even here in Holy Trinity, many weddings, funerals and even Baptisms are planned and scheduled according to *feng shui*, not the Christian calendar. We are told that this is just family tradition, but it is a tradition that (like it or not) is linked to the stars, the zodiac and the gods of Taoism, not the God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some kindly rector somewhere along the way probably winked at the practice and so it remained. That has never made it right for the church or its families.

Similarly, it will take a stronger, more resilient priest (and probably one who is him or herself from this country) to confront the fact that our Episcopal Church in the Philippines, more than 100 years old in these islands, still perpetuates offerings of gin to the spirits of the earth at parties and even condones animal sacrifice, often in the context of *church celebrations*. Congregations expect the clergy to participate in this! I know, because I was once asked to develop an Episcopal rite for animal slaughter! Little wonder, then, that our denomination is known as "Episco-pagan" by other churches in the Mountain Province. It is officially explained that this is the way the mountain people worship the one God. But if "Cabunyan" (as he is called) requires the slaughter of caribaw, chickens and dogs to make peace with men, then he is not the God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and someone, somehow, will eventually have to have the courage to say so...*again!*

Epiphany celebrates the visit of wise men from the pre-Christian and non-Jewish religious traditions of the Middle East. It symbolizes the way in which other pathways towards God can prepare the way for the light of the Gospel and the proclamation of its message of redemption, reconciliation and hope. But those wise men in the story didn't come to Bethlehem for an "interfaith seminar"- they didn't compare notes with the infant Messiah about how his new religion would be accepted as a new and equal partner in the great marketplace of faith. No, the story says that they came to worship him and to give him symbolic gifts. And that says it all.

Christians can learn a lot from other religions and even take some pointers on being more fully human by seeing how others live out the mystery of man's relationship to God. But the Church exists not to confuse the issue, but to help its members along the path we know- a path that works and requires no supplemental system or philosophy. And that must be the witness of the Christian Church and of this parish or we will be guilty of gross misrepresentation about what we say we believe. Epiphany celebrates the "shining forth" of God in the Person of Jesus Christ who will not and ought not share His uniqueness with anyone else. It is why we here in this place can say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.