

January 6, 2008

For the season of peace, we live in very sad and troubled times. Pakistan, Kenya, Sudan, Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan – just a few of the place names which night after night are heard in our TV news reports. The realities of the world around us would seem to make a mockery of the talk about the “peace on earth” we sing of during Christmastide.

It is in such troubled times that we hear again of the Magi – the wise men who visit the baby Jesus. Of the all stories of Christmas, theirs is perhaps the one which has been expanded upon and most romanticised over the years. The very suggestion that there are *three* wise men is an addition to the story, presumably reflecting the three gifts they are said to have brought to Jesus. These three, because of the value of the gifts they bring, have been expanded into kings, and given names (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar in the western tradition, other names in the East). On the assumption that the journey of the Magi actually took place, all sorts of theories have been set forth as to the nature of the star they followed – perhaps a comet, perhaps a supernova or a simply conjunction of the planets. On one internet website someone has even constructed a time-shifting view of the layout of the stars over Jerusalem on Nov. 12, 7 BC, between 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m!

The story has captured our imagination, but all that imagination has not done much to aid our understanding of why Matthew bothers to tell us of the journey of the Magi, and Herod’s response to it. In Matthew’s account of the ministry of Jesus, the story of the wise men serves an important theological purpose, hinted at in the readings which have accompanied our gospel today. Whatever divisions in the human family distract us today, in the Bible the basic division among the peoples is that between the Jew and the Gentile – between Israel and the nations.

In Isaiah we’ve heard of the light of the LORD, which has come to shine on Israel. Yet the emphasis of the chapter is not on Israel’s bathing in this light, but on the attraction this bears for the other nations of the world:

*NRSV 60.3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to*

you...

*5 Then you shall see and be radiant...
because the abundance of the sea shall be
brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to
you.*

*6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
[Sound familiar?!]...*

*11 Your gates shall always be open;
day and night they shall not be shut,
so that nations shall bring you their wealth,
with their kings led in procession.*

Isaiah’s vision is of the nations marking Israel’s God as the god worthy of true homage. A similar theme is heard in the prayer of Psalm 72. From the letter to the Ephesians we heard the writer refer to the mystery of Christ. And what is that mystery? If you had to explain to someone what the “mystery of Christ” was, there are many things you might say. Yet I doubt that many of us would imagine the mystery to be what the writer names here:

*„Ephesians 3.5 NRSV In former generations this
mystery was not made known to
humankind, as it has now been revealed to
his holy apostles and prophets by the
Spirit:*

*6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow
heirs, members of the same body, and
sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus
through the gospel.”*

The “mystery of Christ” is the entry of the Gentiles into the promises of the God of Israel. The journey of the Magi is a foreshadowing of that outcome of Jesus’ ministry.

Picking up on the visions of the older seers, Matthew casts the wise men as the first of the nations to travel to honour the one truly worthy of worship. The promise of peace begins to be realised in their journey and their gifts. Yet there is a great irony here – that when what has been promised to the peoples begins to take shape, the king of Israel schemes to destroy the one who would overcome the divide of Jew and Gentile, to the glory of God. And so to the gifts of gold and frankincense which Isaiah envisioned is added the

gift of myrrh – a bitter herb for embalming the dead. Peace is indeed the promise, and to be the outcome of God's work in Jesus, but peace will not simply drop out of a dream heaven; for the possibility of true peace arises from a passage through death.

This is counter to the desires and expectations for peace we typically express at this time of the year, or which features on our Christmas cards. The desire is heartfelt, and surely shared by all of us. But the possibility of peace – or the task of being peacemakers – this is rarely embraced in biblical terms. Peace can't just be called down from heaven – even by God. If it could, peace would simply be the sheer contradiction of violence and division.

But if such peace could result in an absence of conflict, but it will not bring the presence of *justice*; it won't set things right. The peace-making which we see at work in the life of Jesus is not a mere negating of violence, but a work which passes through violence and division, and suffers it. To see what the Bible means when it speaks of peacemaking we have to see what kind of God it is who makes the peace. This God is one whose divinity is not held in his being unable to suffer, in his being above our conflicts, or being immune to death, but in that he passes *through* death and triumphs over it.

This is a God who takes the world seriously – so seriously that the options of simply starting again or denying the world its freedoms are not entertained. God takes the divisions of the world so seriously that he enters into them, and experiences them himself. But the important thing is that God the peacemaker is changed in the process. A peace bestowed from a distance is a mere gift from God, a divine benevolence which might move us but doesn't affect God; while we might imagine that *we'd* settle for that, this is not the character of the God of Jesus Christ. This God does not merely give, but gives himself. And, in the giving of himself, he undergoes change – death and decay, in the rejection and crucifixion, become real parts of the life of God. God brings peace not as an enlivening bolt from heaven but as life out of death, creation out of destruction. We might even dare to say, with care, that Herod's anxiety and threat against the Child is "necessary" for the possibility of a true peace. It is God's willingness to enter into the fray which indicates what "God-with-us" means – no mere God "for" us, cheering us on or pressing a reset button whenever we fail to function properly, but a God who meets us and endures us, and *survives* us and calls us to follow him in that re-creative way.

In this process we, and God, are brought to a

new place. The peacemaker and the one with whom peace is made are changed. There is a "death" of what was before, and something new rises up. Earlier I read T.S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi". I was struck by the closing reflection of the magus who speaks there:

...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth,
certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have
seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this
Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death,
our death.
We returned to our places, these
Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old
dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

It's not *entirely* clear to me what is meant here, and it is difficult to communicate in reading aloud the interplay of upper- and lower-case letters for birth and death in the poem, but Eliot says of the nativity "This Birth was ... like ... our death" and goes on to confess, given the realities of the world in which he lives, "I should be glad of another death". Perhaps he is thinking of the death of Jesus, taking away the untruth in our lives, perhaps he is recognising the need that he himself must die, if he is to be born again into the peace of God's new heaven and earth.

Yet, these two possibilities are, in the end, the same thing. Jesus Christ, lives the life of God among us, and yet dies our death, and then overcomes that death, and just so shows us how God heals. Here we are offered the sign of what peace-making requires: not simply the limiting of the power of enemies over us, but change also *in us*.

For we are bound together, as God is bound to the world, in such a way that the possibility of true healing requires that even the innocent must become something new – must die and be raised again.

It is in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth that God begins such healing in the world. The wise men journey to Bethlehem to honour the one whose life and love will be without qualification – a life which binds itself to those he is given to love, which suffers and heals what ails them, and becomes the source of hope for a fuller healing of the world in the power of his Spirit.

With those wise men of old, may God's people

today also come in worship, bringing their gifts,
but also bringing their recognition that they too
are called to become peace-makers in the image
of his God's Son. Amen.