

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72(71); Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

For we observed his star and have come to pay him homage

Matt 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Matt 2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The readings from the Infancy Gospels bear an unusually close link to narratives in the Old Testament. Again, the writer is exploring the identity of Jesus, using citations and re-written narra-

tives. It all may seem strange to us, but the original hearers—Jewish Christians—would have had no trouble picking up the resonances and getting at the meaning expressed in the stories.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Behind the story of the magi—wise people—lies the story of Balaam from Numbers 22-24. In the Book of Numbers, an evil king of Moab tries to use the seer/magus Balaam to bring disaster on the people of Israel "because they were so numerous." Against God's will, Balaam obeys the king, but at the point of cursing Israel, Balaam utters an oracle of future hope. This oracle was read in later times as a Messianic promise.

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near—a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." (Num 24:17)

The author takes from this story the narrative of an evil King (Balak / Herod), trying to bring disaster (on Israel / on the Messiah), by means of Balaam (a seer / the Magi). The star in the story comes from Numbers 24 and alerts the reader this time to Messianic fulfilment.

(ii) The gifts offered by the magi call to mind a universalist text in Isaiah:

"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, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." (Is 60:6)

It was concluded from this text as well that the mode of transport of the magi was camels, although Matt supplies no such detail.

(iii) The Magi as a symbol of the Gentiles comes from an echo in Psalm 72:

"May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

Thought for the day

In our deepest selves, each of us is a mystery: Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? How should I live? The risk in our present culture is to sleepwalk through life, to be satisfied with a merely material existence. But the human "project" is much greater. Each of us is really on a pilgrimage, or better on a quest — a quest to become my true self, in image and likeness of God. My truest self is found by being open to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. By following that star, by listening to our conscience and our inner selves, we come home to God.

Prayer

You are the mystery at the heart all that exists: draw us to yourself, O Lord, that knowing you we find our true selves, and finding our true selves, we may come to know you.

May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." (Psa 72:10-11)

From this reference, quite early on it was deduced that the magi were kings, as in all representations since. Eventually they were given names—Balthasar, Melchior and Gasper.

(iv) Bethlehem, the city of David, is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament, unlike Nazareth. The proof text provided was, at the time, read as a messianic prophecy.

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." (Mic 5:2)

KIND OF WRITING

This is a kind of midrash, a Rabbinic style of writing which explores and expounds meaning by a resonant acoustic of echoes. Everything is in some way symbolic, the star, the magi, the king, Bethlehem and the gifts, pointing to the identity of Jesus and the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Matthew's Gospel reflects the historical memory that Jesus did not himself directly evangelise the Gentiles, at least initially.

"These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt 10:5-7)

(ii) Nevertheless, in Matthew's Gospel and community, the Gentiles are an important audience of the Good News (15:6-13-5).

[a] At the start of the ministry: "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt 4:12-17)

[b] During the ministry: "When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope." (Matt 12:15-21)

[c] At the close of the Gospel: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:16-20)

(Matt 28:16-20)

ST PAUL

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:23-29)

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. (Rom 15:8-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Once the Old Testament correspondences and the Gospel anticipations have been uncovered the text practically comments itself.

Verse 1 This is King Herod the Great, who died in 4 bc. The "wise men" are literally "magi". Magus, a Persian loan word, covers a range of meanings: wise man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts. From the East: traditionally a source of wisdom.

Verse 2 The Gentiles identify universal hope in the Jewish Messiah and king.

Verse 3 The historical Herod was quite paranoid about usurpers and even had some of his sons killed. Augustus said of him: "I would prefer to be his pig (*hus*) than his son (*huos*)."

Verse 5 Matthew has Bible experts (like himself) identify the birth-place of the Messiah, with a proof-text from Micah. "Shepherd" reminds us of David.

Verse 7 The hypocrisy of Herod links this symbolic tale with the massacre of the innocents to follow.

Verse 10 Joy comes back in Matthew 28:8 at the empty tomb.

Verse 11 Fulfilling Ps 72 and Isa 60, as noted above.

Verse 12 With no further narrative use for them, the Magi are taken "off stage".

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is the star (the vision, hope or purpose) which lights up your journey?
2. Like the wise men, our life journey is not one we travel alone. Who are the people who share your life journey now?
3. The wise men travelled bearing gifts. What gift do you bring with you on the journey?
4. At times the wise men lost sight of the star. What clouds have obscured your star?
5. Who, or what, might be Herod for you now? What forces, within or without, could subvert the dream or goal?

PRAYER

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of your glory rising in splendour. The radiance of your incarnate Word pierces the darkness that covers the earth and signals the dawn of peace and justice.

Make radiant the lives of your people with that same brightness, and beckon all the nations to walk as one in your light.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

FEAST DAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 60:1-6

This is a thrilling reading, which has enriched how we imagine the Magi.

Second reading

Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6

Who is called into relationship with God? All of us, every human being without distinction. The revelation in Christ is an unveiling of God's longing for us.

Gospel

Matthew 2:1-12

How can we discover or rediscover God and Christ? The human condition may be summarised as "the heart in pilgrimage."

The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise

Eph 3:1 *This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—* 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 *a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.* 5 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. 7 *Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

When we take up the question of God today, one of the questions we must ask is whether God has revealed God's self. Classically, the answer is yes, although today it must be theologically expressed in other ways. Revelation is very much the theme in this reading and, of course, it is very fitting for the feast.

For a variety of good reasons, Ephesians is regarded by many as a text written in the name of Paul but not from the hand of the apostle himself.

KIND OF WRITING

Verses 2-7—not all incorporated into the reading—form a lengthy digression. The language uses is especially expressive. For instance, the Greek behind the rather neutral-sounding “commission” is *oikonomia*, which gave us the post-Vatican II vocabulary of “economy of salvation.”

ORIGIN OF THE READING

This is a short biographical note on the calling of the apostle. It gives us a window on the reception of traditions about Paul in the second generation of his churches. The writer builds on what they already know about the apostle and then goes on to reinterpret his apostolate in terms of a much wider vision of God uniting “all things in Christ.”

RELATED PASSAGES

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:8–14)

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. (Ephesians 6:19–20)

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 16:25–27)

There is a suspicion that this last prayer in Romans may not come from the apostle himself. The vocabulary reflects deutero-pauline language.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The writer connects the calling of Paul with the inclusion of the Gentiles. Although the apostolate involves suffering—following Jesus' own teaching—it is not so clear why it would encompass imprisonment. A few verses on the writer add: *I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.* (Ephesians 3:13)

Verse 2 Here, the author reminds them of what they already know about Paul. Grace is a very Pauline word but economy / commission is not. Cf. 1 Cor 9:17; Eph 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col 1:25; 1 Tim 1:4.

Verse 3 The term “mystery” in v. 3a is a Pauline term but with a special weight of meaning in Ephesians. What was unknown/unknowable has been disclosed/revealed. V. 3b is somewhat enigmatic. The NRSV takes it to refer to an earlier passage—but which? The Greek says “as I wrote briefly before.”

Verse 4 Perhaps the author assumes the recipients have access to a collection of Paul's letters at this stage.

Verse 5 Cf. Eph 2:11-22. NB especially *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.* (Ephesians 2:20–21) The use of “his” is not typically Paul. The genuine Paul speaks of “we” or “us” apostles.

Verse 6 The unknown *economy* of salvation turns out to be the inclusion of the Gentiles. This is not proved by OT citation, as in Paul, but by affirmation of Jesus and his gospel. See this key text of Ephesians: *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* (Ephesians 2:14) The word fellow (*syn* in Greek) again echoes 2:11-22.

Verse 7 The biographical note comes to a close.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Not knowing is very much part of the spiritual journey. It leads to a stance of waiting and listening—we are all expectant “hearers of the word.”

2. God disclosing God's self to us comes in many ways: through nature, others, prayer, the Bible and, in a unique way, through Jesus himself.

3. No one whatsoever is excluded because Gentiles means all non-Jews. “The good news is that God loves us; the ‘bad news’ is that God loves everyone else just as much!” (attributed to P. McVerry SJ)

PRAYER

We stand in awe before the very mystery of your being, O God, and we wait...we await a word of disclosure, the unfolding of your love. Help us to be patient and to recognise the time of your coming. Amen.

They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD

Isa 60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isa 60:4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, 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, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

As even a cursory glance will reveal, the reading is extremely well chosen. Firstly, because of the symbolism of light (more below). Secondly, because of the gathering / coming together of all the faithful. Following a very early intuition based on this text and Ps 72, the reading adds pictorially both the royal status of the Magi and their mode of transport. The mention of gold and frankincense probably inspired the imaginative filling in of these details.

KIND OF WRITING

The writing is poetry and in this case it is almost a textbook example of "parallelism", whereby the second line repeats the first, but in more concrete, sometimes more elaborate vocabulary. For example, vv. 1 and 2 or v.5.

Our excerpt comes from a longer section (60:1-62:12) and even within that the subsection 60:1-22 offers a poem on the light of the Lord. This is in response to Is 59:9-10, which reads: *Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the*

twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. (Isaiah 59:9-10)

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Isaiah 60 comes from Third Isaiah, a prophet or prophets writing in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem, but reflecting a much later situation after the return from the exile in Babylon

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isaiah 58:8-10)

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. (Isaiah 60:19-20)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

To illustrate the theological integrity of this composite book, it may be sufficient to observe that there are many echoes, in the whole of 60:1-22, of earlier passages in Isaiah.

Verse 1 This text presumes that the Temple has been rebuilt and that all peoples will come there to worship. Here it is no longer God who will be their light: they themselves are light and they should shine. Cf. Mt 5:14-15.

Verse 2 After 2a, the repetition in 2b refers the shadow of death or deadly darkness. The Lord's glory is not so much his splendour as the full presence of God.

Verse 3 Notice the delightful evolution

of the poetry: not just nations but kings; not just light but the brightness of your dawn.

Verse 4 Cf. Is 40:10-11. At this point, the addressees seem to be at home in Jerusalem, perhaps in the Temple. Very young children are envisaged.

Verse 5 V. 5ab expresses the spontaneous joy, even exhilaration, at the prospect of salvation. V. 5cd might seem rather greedy, but it is an echo from the book of Exodus, reflecting the despoilment of the Egyptians before departure (Ex 12:13-36). In any case, the bringing of gifts fits the feast. Midian is associated with the Gulf of Aqaba, as is Ephah. Sheba is in south west (modern) Arabia. A substantial distance is imagined.

Verse 6 Cf. Is 40:5. This is where we get the idea that camels are part of the story! The gold and frankincense of 6c are intended for worship, as 6d makes clear. Frankincense is a resin, mentioned in both the OT and NT as a highly desirable and esteemed product. The trade collapsed in the 5th century, after the Christians forbade its use at funerals.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Although the passage is indeed about light, it does acknowledge the need of light as we experience darkness. Not only do we need light, we are to be light as Matthew 5 puts it.

2. The reading is exuberant, to a degree we might find hard to rise to, and yet, joy is truly part of our faith experience.

3. It all culminates in praise of the Lord, that spontaneous gratitude towards God who has loved us so much as to be one of us, the great mystery of Christmas.

4. The sense of pilgrimage, homecoming is very much part of the reading and, of course, part of Christian imagination. Think only of Pilgrim's Progress. Reflect on your one journey of faith, until today.

PRAYER

We praise you, God, for the gift of light in creation, sunlight and moonlight, illuminating all you have made. Above all we thank you for the light of Christ, that you have shone in our hearts. May we welcome this light and become bearers of your light to all around us. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen