

2020 THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

Over the last two weeks the Crib has dominated our Sanctuary. Our focus has been upon Mary, Joseph and the Baby in the Manger.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew was a deeply religious Jewish-Christian writing about the year 85AD in the great city of Antioch. He had at his disposal a body of writings treasured by the Antiochan Church- some of which could be traced back to the Apostle Matthew himself. The Gospel was given Matthew's name because of this.

From perhaps hundreds of stories handed down to him about Jesus' life, this Jewish-Christian scribe, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, made selections which he hoped would give his community a coherent understanding into Jesus' inner nature.

The story of the visit of the three Magi is an 'Epiphany'- a dramatic manifestation of just who Jesus was.

The three scholars from the East- humbly paid homage to the Baby. Why these exalted men felt compelled to fall to their knees and worship the Baby in the manger is conveyed by the gifts they presented- gifts rich in mystical symbolism.

Frankincense was an especially fragrant and expensive incense burnt only in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in the worship of God. Such a gift manifests the belief of the Magi that Jesus was- in truth- God.

Gold, the most precious of all metals, is a gift given to Kings. The gift of Gold highlights their belief that this Babe was destined to reign eternally as the King of Heaven.

Myrrh is a very precious ointment which, because of its wonderful fragrance, was used to mask the smell of dead bodies. This gift underlines Jesus' humanity. Yes, He was truly God and the Eternal King but He was also truly human and thus destined to die.

The gifts symbolically penetrated into the deepest mysteries of Jesus' being.

The story of the Magi had a second important teaching for the Church in Antioch in the mid 80's; a message which is relevant for us today as well. The Christian community in those days was mainly Jewish. But they were in turmoil. Five years earlier, at the Council of Jamnia in 80AD, the leaders of Judaism had placed a curse on all Jews who recognised Jesus as the Messiah.

Jewish Christians were forbidden to worship in the synagogues. It was made clear that a Jewish person could no longer legally be a follower both of Judaism and Christianity. Conversions fell off dramatically.

However the leadership of Christianity was still in the hands of Jewish Christians who, sadly, even though non-Jews were flocking to become Christians, continued to treat non-Jews with suspicion and coldness. It was a crisis.

In the Epiphany story, Jewish Christians are taught that right from the beginning- from the birth of Jesus in the stable- non-Jews were welcomed open-heartedly by Mary and Joseph when they came to worship the new-born Christ.

Statues of the three Magi- like ours- frequently depict one of them with European features, one with African features and one with Asian features- covering the three known continents at the time. The message is clear: there were no barriers to who could enter the Stable. Christ is for all people, for all nations.

Forty four years ago I was asked to leave New Zealand and be Principal of Marist High School in American Samoa. I felt sure that the people there were hungering for my wisdom.

What I very quickly learned was that the Christian faith was far more vibrant in American Samoa than ever I had experienced it to be in New Zealand. Big numbers came to daily Mass. Times of 'Sa'- of quietness- were enforced in all Villages; half an hour a day everything stopped for family prayer. The people had a spiritual depth which captivated me and kept me very humble.

It became just a matter of time before Samoan missionaries would come to New Zealand to help us. Fr. Tovio, who will be with us in three weeks' time, is a Samoan priest. Just as Mary and Joseph gratefully accepted the riches brought to them by the men from the East, let us be open to this wise man from the Pacific and allow ourselves to be enriched by him.

And let us all, open ourselves to the spiritual riches of all the wonderful people from so many cultures who now make up our worshipping community here at St. Mary Star of the Sea. Just as it was in the Stable of Bethlehem- everybody who walks through our doors is precious- and is to be embraced with love.