

According to the church calendar today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Whoops! If this is the first Sunday *after* Epiphany does that mean we've missed it? Well, yes and no. Last Friday was the feast day in which the church celebrated Epiphany but, like Advent and Christmas, Epiphany is a season of which today is the first Sunday, so I believe we're OK. But what exactly is Epiphany? Well, at the very least it can be described as the climax of the Advent and Christmas season and it concludes the period known as *The 12 days of Christmas*, so we should have all taken our decorations down by now. However, and more importantly than that, we are acknowledging the appearance of Christ to the Gentiles, a fact demonstrated by the visit of the gentile Magi to the infant Jesus.

As we begin let us first examine the passage from Matthew read to us this morning. First to say that Matthew is the only gospel writer to record the visit of the Magi, so we must ask why is that? Well, although Matthew's gospel is very much a Jewish gospel, written for the Jews, as evidenced in part by its careful references to the Old Testament, there is a developing theme which is that the good news is for everybody, Jew and Gentile alike, and we see the beginnings of that theme here with the coming of the Magi. Luke uses a phrase in his gospel concerning the Jews, that they are *a light to lighten the Gentiles* (Luke 2:32), words that are familiar to us as they form part of what we call the Nunc Dimittus.

Let's take a look at how Matthew begins his gospel account. It seems he wants to emphasize Jesus' royal line to King David, a line which stretched back 1000 years. Notice he tells us nothing of the events in Nazareth with which Luke starts his birth narrative. Matthew's opening words are, "***After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea...***" Bethlehem is a village about five miles south of Jerusalem. Matthew calls it "*Bethlehem in Judea*" to emphasize that Jesus came from the tribe and territory that produced the line of Davidic kings. That Jews expected the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem and to be from David's family is clear from Jesus own words recorded by John in 7:42 of his gospel, "*Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?*"

"*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, **during the time of King Herod...***" This King Herod is Herod the Great which distinguishes him from the other Herods in the Bible. Herod

the Great was from Edom, an area south of Judah, and was also a practicing Jew. He was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. He gained control in 37 B.C. but like most rulers of the day he was ruthless, murdering his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others--not to mention the babies in Bethlehem referred to in verse 16. Herod died in 4 B.C., so in giving us this information Matthew is helpful in the dating of Jesus' birth.

Just as an aside the Anno Domini system that we use to number the years was devised by a 6th century monk called Dionysius the small but, although his intentions were sound he lacked accurate information so his work is based on faulty calculations, hence why we have Jesus being born at least 5 years before he should have been according to the dating system.

*"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, **Magi from the east came to Jerusalem...**"* Magi, or wise men as we tend to refer to them, were originally a religious caste found among the Persians. They were devoted to astrology, divination, that's from the Latin *divinare*, which means to foresee, and to the interpretation of dreams. And they did indeed come from the east as Persia or southern Arabia is east of Palestine. Since they were looking for the *"king of the Jews"*, as verse 2 tells us, they naturally came to the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem.

In recording this incident Matthew shows that people from other parts of the world, not just from Israel, were anticipating the Messiah. The Magi's visit underscores that Jesus came for all people, not just the Jews. Some of the final words in Matthew's gospel spell out that mission very clearly. *"...go and make disciples of all nations..."*

Notice will you that there is no mention in this passage that the Magi visited the stable. In fact there is no mention at all of a stable; there are no shepherds and no angels. In verse 9 Matthew tells us that, guided by the star, the Magi *went to the place where the child was*. So all this clearly happened after Jesus birth, not at the time of it, so Christmas cards which show wise men standing in a stable are nothing less than wrong. This is why Epiphany is celebrated after Christmas, to try and put some distance between the two events.

Matthew continues by telling us that the Magi asked, ***“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”*** ***When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*** So into this country of Judea, which already had a king of the Jews, one appointed by the Roman senate, another is born, who also bears the title king of the Jews. Matthew goes on to tell us how the infant “king Jesus” is hounded by the earthly Roman appointed King who apparently is all powerful, however, despite his best efforts and all the human resources at his disposal, he is unable to destroy the infant king of the Jews.

We've looked, as much as time permits, at the open verses of chapter 2 and I hope you can see how carefully Matthew is developing his theme with his detail and his observations, all to show his original Jewish readers and us that Jesus is born a real king, not one appointed by an earthly power but by Jehovah Himself, and that this Jewish king came for all, even the astrologers and dream interpreters of southern Arabia.

What then does this mean for us? Well, for further understanding let's turn to our epistle, Ephesians chapter 3. In verse 3 St. Paul speaks of a mystery made known by revelation or, we could say, Epiphany, as a sudden realisation or understanding.

Starting at verse 2: *I am sure you have heard that God appointed me to share his grace with you. I'm talking about the mystery God showed me. I have already written a little about it.*

Then in verse 5 Paul tells us that the mystery was not made known to men in other generations but it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. So, clearly there was a right time when this mystery should be revealed. In verse 6 Paul tells us what the mystery is. *This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.* Heirs and sharers in the promise.

I've have recently become an heir. Following my father's death on the 22nd March his entire estate passed to me. Now before you get too excited please note that it doesn't amount to

a lot, so no begging letters or sob stories please. Please note carefully the words I used. I said that I have recently become an heir. That is because no one can properly speak of themselves as being the heir of someone who is still living since the identity of those entitled to inherit is not determined until death. Now as I am an only child I am by definition the natural heir of my father's estate. I have that status because of close blood relationship and my position as the natural heir cannot be disputed. However it is not a position that, of itself, guarantees that I will in fact become the heir. Many 'natural heirs' have seen their anticipated inheritance rerouted shall we say. The dispersement of my father's estate was entirely at his discretion. Being the natural heir did not ensure that I would become the actual heir. He could have left his estate to the cat's home and my natural status would have counted for nothing. Remember, the exact identity of those entitled to inherit is not determined until after the death.

So why am I telling you this? Well, because of the words in Ephesians 3, verse 6, words which tell of the revealing of a mystery. *This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.* So the mystery is that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, but heirs of what?

There is strong evidence in Scripture that God has chosen the Jewish nation over all other races to be his special people. Let me say here as an aside that that particular notion has kept theologians arguing for centuries and continues to do so. Abram, the titular Father of the Jews, was not himself a Jew but the promise was given to him as was the land. In Deuteronomy 14:2 we read, *"The LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."* And Amos 3:2 says, *"You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth."* Jesus was a Jew, sent to the Jews, however you will recall his conversation with the Canaanite woman. She had asked him for help with her demon possessed daughter and Jesus said to her: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.* The woman said, *"Lord, help me."* Jesus replied, *"It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."* *"Yes, Lord,"* she said, *"but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* Then Jesus answered, *"Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."* And her daughter was healed from that very hour. Jesus'

point was that the gospel was to be given first to Jews. The woman understood Jesus' implication and was willing to settle for "crumbs." For 2000 years God's dealings were almost exclusively, it seems, with the Jews, his chosen people. And then someone died, and remember, the exact identity of those entitled to inherit is not determined until after the death. The consequence of that particular death was that the mystery hidden for 2000 years was revealed and it was this; that others, not thought of as natural heirs, would inherit as well.

Back to verse 6. Notice, will you, the three 'togethers': Gentiles are heirs together with Israel; members together in one body and sharers together in the promise of Christ. Here is Paul, himself a Jew and of the Hebrew tradition, using a Hebraic devise to make his point. You will know that in the Psalms words and phrases are repeated for emphasis. Well here Paul uses something similar – together, together, together. No difference. As Eric Morecambe used to say, *you can't see the join*. What an unexpected inheritance. Remember even the Cats Home gets its full entitlement if it is so bequeathed.

So, there it is. Matthew, in recording the coming of the wise men begins, in his own way, the revelation of the mystery. Paul develops and expands the same theme while the church has given us the season of Epiphany to reflect on our inheritance. So let us celebrate and give thanks throughout this season.