

The World Come to Us

Matthew 2:1-12



This week's local paper published some of the key findings from the 2011 Census about cultural diversity. About a quarter of the residents of the city of Whitehorse were born overseas. The greatest proportion come from China, followed by the UK, India, Malaysia, Vietnam and Hong Kong.

This news wouldn't surprise anyone who has gone shopping in Box Hill Central in recent times. Our community is changing rapidly, and not just ours but our entire nation. Since we opened our doors to refugees and displaced people after World War II, Australia has undergone a remarkable transformation. Wave upon wave of immigrants have settled, and each of them has made Australia a much more interesting place. The world has come to us.

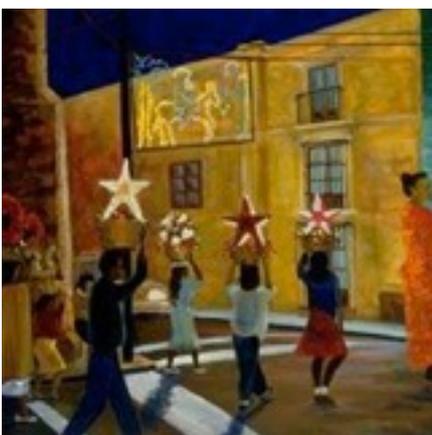
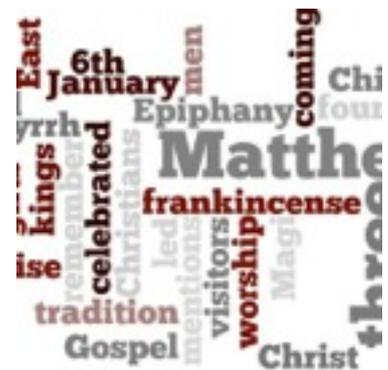
The other news reported in the local paper is that Whitehorse is becoming more religiously diverse. Part of that can be traced back to overseas arrivals. 5% of Whitehorse residents are Buddhist, and 2% are Hindu, both of which are a higher percentage than the number of Lutherans in this area. However, the greatest increase was in the number of people who indicated that they had no religion. 27% of people ticked this box, up from 18% ten years ago. This no-religion group is the fastest growing category in the census. The faiths of the world have come to us too.

This is the world in which we celebrate the festival of Epiphany. This is the day that the church reflects on the global nature of its message, in fact, more than global, as Paul reminds us today, in fact, cosmic. It's in God's nature to bring help and hope to all people, not just people like us. God is determined that the message the angels proclaimed, "good news of great joy for all the people" reaches all places in all generations.

The word "Epiphany" means revelation. What is revealed, Paul says, "is the mystery of Christ ... that through the gospel the Gentiles are

heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." This is not new news to us, who are beneficiaries of this promise and the way that it has been handed down over 2000 years. As you enter our foyer, you can see flags from almost 25 different countries, signifying where our St. Paul's community comes from. God has come to the world, and our church is proof of that.

And yet, Epiphany provides the church with a great challenge: to continue to treasure this mystery revealed, and in each new year to live up to our calling "that through the church the



manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”

The visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus is an object lesson in how those who claim to speak for God fail to see him at work, while those who are on the outer are the ones who get it. And in the background lurk those who want to see God’s work destroyed.

The magi, are, as their name suggest, magicians and astrologers. They come from the east, from Persia. Geographically and philosophically, they were as far away from the faith of Abraham as you could imagine. They didn’t know the scriptures, and they were involved in practices which God’s word condemned. Studying the night skies, they saw a star and knew that it pointed to someone very important. Perhaps they didn’t know where they were going, and what they would find, but something, someone drew them toward Jerusalem. That something was God.



They arrive in Jerusalem, the obvious places to ask this question: “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” This question lobbed into the corridors of power like a hand-grenade. Herod, his advisors, and even the religious authorities were deeply unsettled. It’s easy to understand Herod’s reaction. He was a vicious and brutal deputy of Rome. He had one of his wives killed, and murdered three of his sons when they threatened his hold on power. When he came to the throne, he had a purge of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin and killed many of their number.

Perhaps that’s why the chief priests and the teachers of the law were also unsettled. You would have thought that they would have been

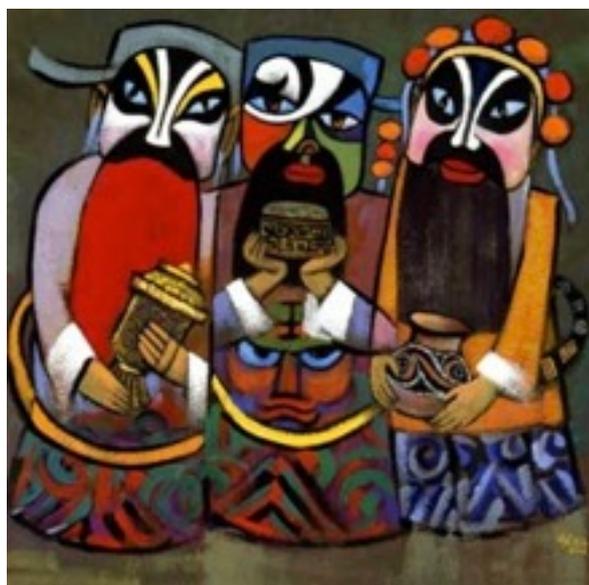
overjoyed by the visit of the magi, and the question that they asked? Was now the time that God would come good with his promise of a Messiah to lead his people? Perhaps they had long given up on any expectation that God would act. He hadn’t spoken through any prophets for three centuries. Wasn’t it better to accommodate yourself to reality, rather than live in hope? They owed whatever power and influence they had to Herod. They had to keep on his good side. Nevertheless, when Herod asks the question about where the Messiah to be born, they dutifully answered: Bethlehem.

Herod hatches his sick plan to get the magi to do his dirty work and find out the identity of the child born King, under the pretence of wanting to worship this child. He will do what he always does: use violence to get his way. Meanwhile the magi take the final step of their journey. The star leads them to Jesus’ home. “When they saw the star they were overjoyed.” This is perhaps

understated. Luke writes that they were “joyful with a very great joy.” Herod was threatened, the religious leaders were largely unconcerned, but these unlikely foreigners were ecstatic.

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.” They did what you do when you come face to face with a king. There’s every reason for the magi not to be there, in the presence of the incarnate God. They are heretics. They don’t worship the right God. They are from the wrong race. But they go further. They fulfil the promise God has given through Isaiah: “And all from Sheba will come, bearing God and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.”

“Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Their gifts point forward to Jesus’ identity and to the purpose of his life. Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest faithfully serving by praying and offering sacrifices, and



then myrrh, used for the embalming of a body. This gift sends a shiver down the spine. This gift was hardly fit for a Messiah king, as understood by the priests and the teachers of the law. But it’s the gift that reveals God for who he truly is: a Creator who is willing to empty himself and take on the form of a vulnerable child. His Son will be rejected by his own people, punished by the powerful, and suffer death for all people.

The visit of the magi is a much loved story, but also a confronting one for those of us who are on the inside. Like the priests and the teachers of the law, we are the people who know the word of God. We confess the baby born in Bethlehem as not only the King of the universe, but also the servant and the Saviour of all people. What do we do when we are confronted by others who come to us, wanting

to worship one born King of the Jews? Do we check their credentials, or their family background? Or are we simply thrilled that God’s message has seeped into the most unlikely places, in the most unlikely ways. There is a lot about the way God works in the world that it still mysterious to us. His Spirit uses all kinds of circumstances and experiences to plant the seed of faith in Jesus, the Messiah King, in ways that are beyond our imagination and experience. This is God’s “eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In Box Hill, the world has come to us. In Jesus, God has come into the world. We live in that wide space where God and the world meet, sometime through our words and our witness, and other times in ways that we can hardly comprehend, through pathways that make no sense to us. Our goal and our prayer is that together we may all “bow down and worship Jesus,” the newborn King. Amen.

