

Sermon for the Epiphany of Our Lord

Readings: Isaiah 60:1–6; Ephesians 3:1–12 & Matthew 2:1–12

One thing I did to cope during the lengthy times of isolation in lockdown last year, was to watch a number of South Korean television series. I enjoyed them so much, that if I ever do watch anything on TV nowadays, then it's usually one of those. The type of South Korean series I prefer are romance drama or romance comedy, and as I watched them last year, I realised that there is often a common theme with the storyline of each series which, I assume, must be a reflection of life in South Korea.

Usually, one of the central characters in the series will be either the son or daughter, or grandson or granddaughter, of the chairman or chairwoman of a *chaebol*. A chaebol is the word for a large industrial conglomerate that is run and controlled by a wealthy person or family. This central character from the rich family is often being groomed, most against their will, to manage the company and inherit the family fortune. Often there will also be a stepson or stepdaughter in the wealthy family whose mother, and or father, is scheming to undermine the legitimate heir, so that their child might be chosen to manage the company and inherit the family fortune instead.

Several aspects of today's story from the Gospel of Matthew remind me of these South Korean TV series. One in particular, is the behaviour of King Herod. In my mind, he fits perfectly the description of the illegitimate heir to the company and family fortune. In the time of Jesus, the Jewish people still lived in hope of the coming of a Messiah, someone who would be descended from King David, and who would defeat the Romans and restore Israel to its former glory. Herod was not descended from the line of David, and therefore he lacked a legitimate claim to the throne of Israel. He was basically a "puppet" king of the Roman Emperor. Herod came to power with Roman support, and ruled the territory of Judea with Roman approval. So when wise men (or *magi*) from the East came to Jerusalem and asked to see the child who had been born king of the Jews, Herod was naturally threatened and worried about who this child was.

This is due to the widely held belief at the time in first-century Palestine, that any unusual heavenly event, such as the appearance of a comet or a previously unknown star, signified the birth of a great leader. So when the magi told Herod they had observed the rising of a new star, and had followed it to pay homage to this newborn king, Herod called all of the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem to him and asked them what the prophecies said about where the Messiah was to be born. They responded to Herod by telling him of the prophecy from the prophet Micah, which we actually heard in the Old Testament reading on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and would be a descendant of King David.

Herod therefore tried to trick the magi into disclosing the location of the baby Jesus, so that he could do away with his competition, however, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country without saying a word to Herod.

In Christian tradition, the story of the magi has become synonymous with the Christmas story, although many aspects of the story in the tradition are not even found in Matthew's

account. For example, there is no mention in Matthew's story of the magi being kings, nor is there any mention of how many magi there were. Our nativity scene, like all nativity scenes that I'm familiar with, has three magi, or kings as they are often depicted. Perhaps the number three was accepted in the tradition because there are three different gifts mentioned – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – and maybe it was assumed that each was a separate and individual gift from one of the magi.

A reader of Matthew's Gospel, who was familiar with the Jewish scriptures, might have recognised this story of the Epiphany as the fulfilment of the prophecies that were foretold in both our reading from the prophet Isaiah and Psalm 72 this morning. Verse 10b from Psalm 72 states, "may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts", while verse 6b of Isaiah says, "all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD."

Today in the twenty-first century, people associate the word 'epiphany' with a moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation, and this is exactly what the Epiphany of the Lord was over two thousand years ago. It was the moment that God chose to reveal Himself in the birth, and subsequent life, of Jesus Christ. Importantly though, as the Apostle Paul pointed out in this morning's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, through this revelation, ALL the people of the world, not just the Jewish people but the Gentiles as well, are called to participate in God's salvation, which is made available through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And as Paul goes on to say, it is "through the church that the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known". Despite its faults, the church is the body of Christ in the world. It is through the church, which includes each one of us, that God is revealed and made known to people today. Because each one of us is a member of the body of Christ, we have the opportunity, through our own lives, by our thoughts, actions and words, to reveal something of God to those whom we interact with.