

Epiphany 2022

Last week's gospel left us hanging, with Luke's image of Mary responding to the unfolding events in her life:

"But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

This week our Epiphany reading from Matthew reveals the different ways in which the men around her responded to intimations of God and of God's glory.

On a macro level we have **Herod**, who inhabits the throne of power, and on a micro level we have **Joseph** who is a peasant in an unconventional marriage.

One man is powerful and one man is not. And yet the text only describes one of these men as being afraid.....And it wasn't the peasant.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that King Herod made the magi tell him where this baby was because he was **frightened**.

And Matthew presents us with these additional visitors to the Holy Family - wise ones apparently, and just a side note that no defining number is given – just 'magi from the east'the rest we have embellished in our hymns and folklore.

Now, we've been playing a game in my house over the last few days, I've been asking friends and family

Who would be those magi, those wise visitors in 2022?

And who would they be if a requirement of the game was for my congregation to have heard of them? !

In the light of the news, exactly a week ago, of the death of a very wise and wonderful man; Desmond Tu Tu was the first person that came to my mind and then to add to the interfaith aspect and because of their beautiful friendship I had to have the Dalai Lama.

I can just imagine the two of them giggling with delight at the sight of the Christ child lying in a manger surrounded by animals and scheming together never to let Herod know!

They would, I suggest be among the *unafraid characters* in our story.

From my poll, a number of public intellectuals and theorists came up – Noam Chomsky was one and then came the challenge to find a woman who would be well enough known – it is not, by the way, the lack of wise women it is just that for centuries their names have not been promoted (cf the renaissance of Julian of Norwich).

The women's names that came up around our dinner table was Nina Simone and Greta Thunberg and Dolly Parton.

Then after the guest edit on the Today Programme Raheem Stirling was added to the list.

But a friend who came over on Thursday night added a new perspective to the list she said, as quick as a flash, the local school teacher, the local care worker, the NHS worker.....

So, who would you choose?

Remember they can come from any nation, any walk of life because Matthew is deliberately signposting us to the universality of the Christ bringing hope and love to *all* people but only if those people can be open to it and not threatened by the implications of universality which inevitably undermines power and greed.....this good news is for the unafraid

The 'Herods' of this world, terrified of what they stand to lose in this new Christ centred world will move mountains to destroy the good news out if fear....

This is what fear does. Fear disguises itself in so many ways: as greed, hate, isolation, addiction...the list is endless. But in the end fear is at the root of all of it. And while you and I might not be murderous tyrants, none of us are free from the effects of fear in our lives.

If we let it flourish, it will keep us isolated and small and steals away all joy and possibility.

Back in the stable. domestic arena we must remember Joseph a different kind of man, a man who is not afraid.

And here's one clue – one way that we can know that Joseph was not afraid: he didn't bat an eye when the angel said that his baby and wife weren't safe so he should take his family to Egypt.

Egypt has history for him, has baggage it is the place his ancestors were enslaved. The place that God rescued his people from slavery.

With fear cast out, Joseph was able to believe it possible that God's redemptive work can happen anywhere - even Egypt.

With fear cast out, Joseph no longer had to see everything through the lens of what it was in the past.

With fear cast out, he was able to beat a king, protect his wife and child, and preserve that which is good in the face of tyranny.

Herod's fear terminated lives and Joseph's fear/lessness protected life.

The wisdom of the magi meant they too cast out fear, they went away and pondered and promoted the story and protected the baby by disobeying the most powerful man of the moment .

The same man who murdered Jesus cousin – John, and who murdered hundreds of innocent children and whose empire in the end, as we know only too well, crucified Jesus of Nazareth. But this child who escaped the slaughter of the innocents and survived into adulthood, did not overthrow Rome, he however laughed Rome. He saw Rome for what it was: **temporary**. Fleeting. Harsh and demanding and tyrannical, yes, but temporary.

And this child, protected by the songs of angels and the heart of his mother and the fearlessness of his father, and the fascination of the wise ones, came to free the people.

Free us from the shackles of sin and fear, free us from fear of the powerful.

Gospel people who receive this news, are free people and free people are dangerous people, dangerous people like Desmond Tu Tu who defied the authorities and the white supremacists, who defied Margaret Thatcher and went straight to the City of London to negotiate a boycott of investments in South Africa.

Free people like Nina Simone singing her songs of resistance, like Raheem Stirling and Marcus Rashford speaking out against grinding poverty that blights so many lives in the midst of obscene wealth.

Free people like Gretta are prepared to stand alone against all odds to shout the truth about climate change

These wise people aren't ruled by fear.

These Free people see Rome/Apartheid/Segregation/ Poverty/Climate breakdown to name just a few forms of oppression, for what it is.

The Church Times obituary said this:

'Archbishop Desmond Tu Tu looked evil in the eye and preached justice, peace, love, and inclusion.....'

Along with the magi and Herod, Tu Tu now takes his place in the history books BUT they must all continue to speak to us of the future – can we be alive to the despotic tendencies of future Herods? And can we have ears and eyes open to hear the words of insight and see the hope of the Magi and Tu Tu's ?

That is our new year challenge and our every day challenge...

And you know what just like each of those I have mentioned we too have

our angels hovering round us, the good people of God, the call of the Holy Spirit, the guidance of scripture. There are messengers and messages of love all around.

And again, and forever, they say: *do not be afraid*.

Do not be afraid.

For in the heart of God there is enough love to cast out fear.

Herods of the world, take note.....