

Down to earth stargazers

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 2 January 2022

A Reflection by L J Robson

Feast of Epiphany C

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Matthew 2: 1-12

The new year opened with fireworks and the usual hoopla.

Matthew's gospel opens with the appearance of unnamed visitors from the East to the infant Jesus and his parents. This is an odd story to open this gospel. The purpose of the visitors is to recognise Jesus as the King of the Jews.

The recognition is an epiphany for those who have eyes to see. Ironically the designation of the *King of the Jews* is attached to the top of Jesus' cross, and bookends the gospel.

There are numerous epiphanies in the gospels where something significant is revealed about Jesus. This is the first of these epiphanies.

Matthew's gospel is a realistic one: it speaks disruption, anxiety, pain and grief. This gospel never lets go of the real world, like our world now, a place of climate change and widespread political and social upheaval, incessant judgement and relentless rage.

But wait!

If this is all that Matthew has to tell us, then it is a very depressing catalogue. Matthew corrects and balances this depressing scenario by showing that the arrival of the visitors (Magi) signals very clearly that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. This means that God's promised future has begun to materialise with Jesus' birth. A new order of things.

What does this mean in real terms? The Gospel tells us: *that through Jesus the blind are able to see, sick are healed and the dead are raised to life. And yes, he is going to undermine boundaries of race, class and gender.* Jesus invites everyone to experience belonging and share in an "us" story, not a "them" story.

In reflecting on belonging, I recall very vividly that the late Desmond Tutu spoke in this church. I had the unspeakable pleasure of meeting him. He shook my hand and looked me in the eyes. His eyes sparkled and his body radiated profound spiritual power. I'll never forget that experience. Never, ever. His life story is well known and beyond the hackneyed word "inspiring".

He spoke his mind to black and white. He had no fear. Why? Because he was a person of prayer. Profound prayer. He knew that Jesus Christ was his trusted guide no matter how threatened and afraid he may have been. That is an epiphany for me. Both Tutu and Mandela worked tirelessly to promote and make real on-the-ground belonging and inclusion.

The call for belonging and inclusion is growing louder and louder across this wide country, from First Nations people. The call is enshrined in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. A document of 11 paragraphs. It is the outcome of long, detailed conversations. Meeting in the desert under the stars; under stars.

The last paragraph of the Uluru Statement is powerful and compelling: *"In 1967 we were counted; in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future."*

Remember, Matthew tells us that the visitors/magi came from the East to the Jesus child. Our indigenous brother and sisters are coming from the physical heart of Australia to us. Are we waiting and preparing for them? It is up to me to make sure that there is no Herod-like response from me. I have heard their voices. I will seal the Treaty. I will hear the Truth.

Indigenous history speaks of over 200 years of struggle. Matthew's gospel and others show us Jesus in struggle and competition with those seeking to bring him down and destroy him.

Power brokers – Masters of the Universe – don't want competition. Especially from anyone beating a drum about welcome, belonging, hospitality. And speaking of drums, we know the melody – the music score of Jesus – love, grace, compassion, humility, non-violence, equality, human dignity. That is enough to scare any Master of the Universe.

This melody of Christ has enriched lives, enriched the world, despite what his so-called followers have done to subvert it. As a follower of the Jesus way, I can't be tone deaf to this melody. Can you?

We can look at the stars and countless other places for light. But the light does not come from those places, but from a life lived in 1st century Palestine. That light still comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Herod-types were determined to put out, extinguish, the light of Jesus Christ in a grave outside Jerusalem. How wrong they were!

The natural tendency of living creatures towards light, and the life and growth that light gives, are images of our growth towards the light of God. To move towards God and find union with God is to move closer towards the epiphany light.

Janine di Giovanni has spent 30 years as a reporter in the most dangerous war zones in the Middle East - the most dangerous places in the world, in fact. In her astonishing and compelling book, *The Vanishing*, she tells of the handfuls of Christian people now left in those earliest of Christian countries.

She says *"It is the light of Christ that has kindled hope, that has sustained Christian communities for many years, even as they have been inundated by invaders, disease, poverty, waves of emigration; that have left their neighbourhoods empty and devoid of their rich centuries-old cultural and spiritual life.*

Churches were razed to the ground in Mosul, but I saw people attending them anyway, squatting on broken pews in half-built structures, still whispering prayers that they truly believed would elevate them to something higher than their immediate desperate circumstances.

"I wrote this book", she says "as a way of acknowledging that their faith, in so many ways, is more powerful than any of the armies I have seen trying to destroy them."

Those beleaguered Christians Janine di Giovanni writes about with profound affection, are able to say with St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54

"Where, O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting?

But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord."

If I can say these words with St Paul, I will be able to perceive something of the meaning of the feast of the Epiphany we observe today.

And for that I say, thanks be to God.