

Gifts for groundedness and growth, in the power of three

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 05 January 2025

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany C

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Symbolism abounds in the season of Epiphany, this great season of revelation, or spiritual revealing, that we are now entering. This morning it is focused especially in the visit of the Magi to the newborn Christ, a narrative rich in symbolic meaning. For today, let us reflect on two features: the significance of the gifts brought by the Magi, and of the number three associated with them.

In doing so, let me speak briefly about three things: firstly, interpretations of the gifts and their three-ness in Christian Tradition; secondly, further perspectives on the gifts and three-ness which we may glean from other traditions, somewhat as the Magi helped enlarge the Judaeian context of Jesus; and, thirdly, what gifts and symbolic three-ness we might offer up from our Australian contexts to bring further Epiphany meaning and spiritual revealing...

Firstly, let us remind ourselves of the significance of the Magi, their gifts, and three-ness in the Christian Tradition. For time's sake, I will not this morning delve into the various traditions associated with the Magi themselves, except to note the significance of their name and character. For to any narrow tribal understanding of Christ, these are very foreign figures, representative of the many other pathways into wisdom and spiritual transformation in our world. In their presence in the story, they reflect mature Christian faith that recognises that all life-giving spiritual pathways thus lead towards the same place, and that, as with the Magi's reverence for the infant Jesus, we are called to recognise and reverence all that is good and holy in them.

The Magi's gifts are also profoundly significant, particularly as pointing to the depth of spiritual meaning we are encouraged to in Christ, as means by which we can find true groundedness and growth for our lives and world. In general, there are two groups of interpretation. On the one hand, they can be viewed as ordinary offerings to a king, or special figure: with gold for great value, frankincense as life-enhancing perfume, and myrrh as oil for anointing. Spiritually speaking, applied to our own lives, this encourages us to build on God in Christ, who, like gold, is the most secure and valuable foundation and currency we can share.

This encourages us to use prayer, like perfume, as a means of bringing greater joy and nuance to our lives. This encourages us to anoint ourselves, like myrrh, with spiritual oils which can bring balm and healing, in the face of suffering, even that of death. On the other hand, Christian Tradition also sees the Magi's gifts as pointing to the Christ. As, for example, the great early theologian Origen put it: the gold relates to Christ as to a king, on earth; myrrh, as an embalming oil and symbol of suffering and death, to Christ as profoundly human; and incense, as a symbol of deity and holiness, to the divinity of Christ.

In a similar manner, in Christian Tradition this is expressed in three key roles associated with Christ: as king, priest, and suffering servant. These all resonate powerfully with other texts in the Bible, as do the three visitors themselves, who, like the three visitors to Abraham in Genesis, have lively echoes of God as Holy Trinity, glory and oneness expressed in particularity and diversity.

The mythological significance of the number three is therefore typically prominent in Christian interpretations of the Epiphany. This, in the case of the Magi, has partly been somewhat elaborated, and over-popularised in the traditions of the '*three kings*'. For, apart from the fact that there is no mention of the Magi being kings, there is also no indication of their number. Check the actual Biblical text! The Magi could therefore be anything in number between 2 and 20, or more. The idea that there were three of them is really drawn from them bringing the three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. From this, assumptions were drawn that these gifts were brought, each respectively, by three individuals, and that, being expensive gifts, they must have come from people who were rich and powerful, like kings. Whilst that is all speculation, the number three is however, as I have indicated, highly significant in other ways.

Threeness is certainly a significant feature in other spiritual traditions. One of the current excellent exhibitions in Sydney, for example, is the Australian Museum's '*Macchu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru*.' It includes some stunning ancient gold, ceramic, and other artefacts in its multi-sensory displays. It also shares some striking introductions to the rich and complex mythologies and spiritualities of ancient Peruvian societies, including Andean fascination with natural life cycles, birth and death. It is impossible in this not to find resonances, as well as distinct differences, with aspects of other spiritual and symbolic systems across the globe, including Christian elements.

The differences are certainly important, not least, as with other Indigenous peoples, the very strong grounding of Andean mythologies in the life of the Earth and the whole of Creation, understood as intrinsically interdependent. Other elements, such as the nature of sacrifice, are, it has to be said, also quite arresting. When the conquistadores arrived from Europe in the 16th century with their colonial ambitions and blinkers, they certainly had little or no interest in such spiritualities. Yet there are also elements which enable us to deepen and enlarge our understanding of our own spiritual traditions, especially when we come to highly symbolic narratives like that of the Epiphany of Christ.

Let me therefore offer two particular ways in which, like the Magi visiting from other cultures, ancient Andean spiritualities may enrich our own. This, hopefully, may encourage you to make similar links of your own, just as the Magi connected Christ with their own spiritual traditions.

Firstly, in the case of ancient Andean mythologies, there was a strong developed sense of the depth, mystery, and variety of existence. A common feature, not least, was belief in three interconnected worlds: that of the gods or heavenly realms, that of humanity and earthly existence, and that of the inner realms. That resonates somewhat with the understanding of the interconnected tripartite nature of Christ: as priest, relating to the heavenly world; as king, relating to the earthly world; and as suffering servant, relating to the inner world and spiritual journeying.

These, as we see from our Gospel reading today, are the kinds of connections that many early Christians were actively encouraging people of different cultures to make, and which are represented by the presence of the Magi. In the case of the ancient Andeans, for example, they too had figures such as the mythological superhero Al Apaec who approximate in some ways with Christ. In Al Apaec's case, it is his vocation to travel, like Jesus, through the three worlds of existence, facing formidable challenges, displaying spiritual gifts, sacrificing their life, and returning home reborn, thus ensuring the continuity and re-creating of life. Such are the similar themes of the meaning of the Christ story to which Epiphany points us.

For, secondly, at their best, ancient Andean spiritualities encourage us to understand the spiritual life as a call to participate in divine transformation. In the case of the ancient Andeans, this was expressed in the transformation of spiritual figures in different guises. In the place of the character of the king in the Judaeo-Christian narrative, we thus find political and religious leaders represented also as big cats, the earthly world's most fearsome predators.

In the upper, or heavenly, world of the gods, such leaders would however then become birds, representing greater and deeper vision and the power of movement, as in flight. Owls, in particular, active as they are at night, were also significant, seen as able to communicate between the upper, heavenly, earthly, and inner worlds. Hummingbirds were also considered active messengers from the dead. Meanwhile, snakes, slithering underground, were understood as representations of how we can enter the inner world, and, like the dead, like germinating seeds, can enable life once more. For snakes are like flowing water, and after they slough off old skin, emerge anew, as if reborn.

Again, this resonates with the different features of Christ represented in the Epiphany narratives: not just today's story of the strangers from other worlds with their gifts, but stories such as those of the baptism of Jesus, the changing of water into wine, and the transfiguration, which appear in our lectionary in the next few weeks. Epiphany, in other words, is an encouragement to engage in our spiritual journeying as a pathway to transformation: changing shape and role as appropriate, as we negotiate the various worlds of our own experience, earthly, heavenly, outer and inner. If not king, priest, or suffering servant, perhaps there is therefore some other transforming image to which you feel called in this new year: maybe cat, owl, hummingbird, or snake, or something quite other. Such is how God continues to bring light in, among, and through us.

So what, then, of this continent and our own Australian contexts? How, like the Magi at that first Epiphany, might we offer our own gifts from here and what might they be? And which animal or other indigenous natural figures convey, embody, and call to us of Christ? Let me offer three suggestions. For, if the Magi had travelled to Bethlehem long ago from this continent, what gifts do you think they would have brought?

Like the ancient Andeans, I think they would have been trying to express similar spiritual themes to those of the Magi's own cultures, but even more grounded in the earth itself. They would also have acknowledged gold, frankincense, and myrrh as symbols both of the nature and meaning of Christ, and as pointers to what can bring life and transformation to us. But they would have offered their own cultural insights too.

Alongside gold, as a symbol of what can ground us more fully in what is truly valuable for our lives, I would therefore suggest that, from our Australian context, we might also bring soil, earth itself. After all, in such an ecologically disturbed era, this is truly foundational for our lives. If gold can continue to speak of the underlying sovereignty of God, this needs to be connected with our First Peoples' understanding of Country as ultimate, the source and strength of all value. Like Garry Worete Deverell, if we in that way perceive Christ as Country, earth itself is indeed a fitting such symbolic expression.

Secondly, alongside frankincense, perhaps the gift of eucalyptus leaves also resonates. Like frankincense it is also interconnected with elemental features such as air and fire, and lifts us out of different states into others. Like frankincense, its very fragrance is evocative: of healing, balm, and transformations. And then, thirdly, alongside myrrh, we might bring water: another element which can take different forms, and carry us around, through, and beyond great obstacles, whether of loss, death or suffering of various kinds; a gift of nature and grace which helps us flow, bathe, and rejoice into possibilities and realities of new life.

How do you experience divinity revealed among us, and in and through the many cultures of our world?

Epiphany is so much more than a simple and straightforward narrative. Rather, it invites us to receive the gifts of all, from so many times and places in history and today, in so many natural and other forms, and, vitally, to bring our own.

For in the power of spiritual three-ness, we can live into the vibrant interconnectedness which brings life to us all: in the hope, peace, and joy of that embodied and transforming love we know in Christ, Amen.