

Sunday 1 January, 2017 – 8am service

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Dr Stephen Ames, on the Feast of the Epiphany.

Today we proclaim the strange God who came into the world as a baby, who ended up as a man on a cross. Wise men following a Star from the East arrived in Jerusalem to announce the birth of the king of the Jews. The child became a man nailed to a cross bearing the title, 'The King of the Jews'. From beginning to end he made God manifest to anyone who could bear the light.

Notice that the Christ child escaped but all the little Jewish boys around Bethlehem were slaughtered by Herod's soldiers. Long before Jesus died for them, they died for him. This epiphany of God as the Lord of the cosmos and the Lord of the Nations is what we celebrate and lament today. Why lament? Because the light attracts the darkness at great cost to the light. Nevertheless, the good news is that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

So here are some vignettes on this theme – the epiphany of God.

The first is a story about the south Sudanese community, young and old, at Holy Apostles Sunshine celebrating Christmas with extraordinary vitality and joy as shown to us on 'Our ABC'. This was very different from the much-reported realities of other South Sudanese young people caught up in gangs and drugs and crime, and this for all kinds of reasons. Like many other Australian young people, they are completely disengaged from standard schooling, with no job prospects. Let us hope and pray that the light shining through this South Sudanese Christian community in Sunshine might attract other South Sudanese people young and old.

The second vignette concerns extremists. Just before Christmas, police arrested four young men allegedly for preparing to commit a terrorist act, namely the bombing of the Cathedral, of Federation Square, and of Flinders Street Railway Station on Christmas Day.

They were planning a great manifestation of devastating violence, which they thought was well hidden. The explosions would have been the manifestation of darkness.

Leaders of the various faith communities in Melbourne quickly came together to condemn the attempt and to express solidarity in seeking peace for all people. All of them recognise the importance of a social order in which people and property are respected; a social order that enables life to flourish and God to be honoured. That is why, in the old Prayer Book, we prayed for "the punishment of wickedness and vice and the maintenance of thy true religion and virtue." All the while allowing that the order in which live can be improved. In this too we recognise the manifestation of God.

On Christmas Eve, we all breathed a great sigh of relief and rightly gave thanks to God for the police and other agencies protecting us.

The four young men were Hamza Abbas, 21, of Flemington, Ahmed Mohamed, 24, from Meadow Heights, 26-year-old Abdullah Chaarani and Ibrahim Abbas, a 22-year-old man from Broadmeadows. Three are Australian born of Lebanese ethnicity and one an Australian citizen born in Egypt. They are at risk of spending many years in jail. Why had they wanted to kill and maim us and destroy the centre of our city?

This question cannot possibly be seeking a justification for the planned bombing. No such bombings are justified wherever they may happen.

But if we are seeking to understand why they would want to visit mayhem on us, we should at least recall those other three wise men, this time from the west, who led the coalition of the willing, including Australia, to invade Iraq, a Muslim country, at great cost to the Iraqis. The Chilcot inquiry into Britain's decision to join in the unauthorised invasion of Iraq, based on poor intelligence, and most definitely not as a last resort, should give us pause. Let's take stock that we aren't the only ones who can administer shock and awe. This is not a cheap point from the luxury of hindsight. In 2003 St Paul's Cathedral mounted a public protest against the war, because all of the public utterances on the coming war failed to convince us that war was the right way forward. We conducted a daily lunch time vigil, with public speakers, a petition, and a huge sign saying 'Peace not War', covering a very large part of the Cathedral facing Swanston Street. David Richardson, the Dean at the time, was criticised at a public meeting for the sign on the Cathedral. He replied, if the Cathedral can't witness to the Prince of Peace who can? Well done David. This too was the epiphany of God.

While we are thinking about Muslims, here is another vignette, this time about the Muslim young people in Jakarta surrounding churches to protect them from Muslim extremists over Christmas. One young person spotted a strange bag in a church and shouted for everyone to get down, while he picked up the bag and ran out of the church. He was blown up. This self-sacrifice for others by this young Muslim man, is also the epiphany of God.

An Australian story of violence and the epiphany of God is shown in the novel and movie, *The Dressmaker*, about Tilly Dunnage the dressmaker who returned to Dungatar in outback Victoria to look after her aging mother Molly. Tilly left after growing up bullied and blamed by the town for the death of the boy who bullied her. The story tells how the bullying, spite and blame continue against Tilly on her return. We take up the story at Molly's funeral.

"Reginald handed Sergeant Farrat the bill for the cost of the casket and the hire of Alvin's van. The sergeant put it in his pocket, took the shovel from Tilly and said, 'Let's tuck Molly in, then go and drink laced tea until we feel some understanding has been reached on behalf of Molly Dunnage and the life she was given.'"

"Much later Beulah heard them singing as she crept up The Hill.

She crouched at the back window and saw Tilly Dunnage leaning with Sergeant Horatio Farrat, who was wearing a frock. The kitchen table was littered with empty bottles, discarded clothing and old photograph albums, and the Holy Bible lay open, its pages stabbed and ripped – they'd found no understanding in it, so had killed it. The two mourners

swayed together with their heads back singing, *'You made me love you, I didn't want to do it -'*

See the violence done to the Bible representing God. They killed it. Such rage is a sign of how much they desired from God, of some understanding of their lives. Like a photographic negative, this is an odd epiphany of God who goes unrecognised, unmet. I mentioned this incident to several Christians who had read the book. They had no recollection of it. They did not see this re-enactment of the crucifixion of Jesus. It was left out of the film.

My last vignette comes from the Queen's Christmas day speech, the Queen drew attention to all the good that is done through simple acts by many, many, many, people every day. It is from this underlying current of good flowing between us that makes life worthwhile and contrasts to the failings, the self-preoccupations, even stupidities, and the outright deceptions, lies, and even violence that also show up. How is this relevant to the feast of the Epiphany?

Well it must be that the darkness does not finally overcome the light. Every day, doing simple acts of good to others, is reborn in enough people that the darkness does not overcome the light.

But there is more. These simple acts acknowledge the unconditional worth of other persons. Which means that the world view that says everything is conditioned by everything else is not true. Otherwise there would be nothing unconditional. So, these simple acts are showing there is something that transcends all conditions and we are in touch with this transcendent reality, whenever we go with the flow of doing simple good things for others.

This transcendent reality, traditionally called God, often goes unrecognised, though is present in all these simple actions done every day. God remains hidden for many people unless they come to recognise the God hidden in the flow of the simple good done every day. This recognition may come out of the blue. Or may be a conversation, perhaps involving you, takes this turn; or maybe recognition comes from watching a TV report of what a simple courageous act of good cost someone and what it made possible. Or, maybe in the moment of doing a simple act of good for someone, this recognition come like getting a whispered joke.

The Gospel tells the strange story of this God who is everywhere present even if unrecognised, who came into the world as a baby in a manger and ended up as man nailed to a cross. Even more amazingly this is the God who said let there be light for the creation of this amazing universe, and who shines in our hearts the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.