

Sunday 6 January, 2019 – 10.30am

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on the Feast of the Epiphany 2019:

'May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.' (Ps 19.24).

They had travelled a long way with their precious cargo. They had seen a star arise in the East and decided to follow it. 'Wise men from the East', the evangelist called them. Astronomers, who observed the skies, well acquainted with the courses of the heavenly bodies that suddenly made the startling discovery of a new star. A star that had risen in the East, like the sun, and that kept ascending. A star that, ultimately, coaxed them out of their observatories; they had decided that this star was not like others and, scholars that they were, they must have agreed that they should follow that star. The sudden arrival of the star didn't leave them enough time to prepare for their journey: they left their homes in haste, yet packed gifts worthy for a king—it was, after all, a royal star.

Their route would have taken them through deserted lands, if they were lucky on caravan routes, but probably not; stars don't ordinarily move in a roundabout way. They must have travelled far through the deserts of present-day Iraq and Jordan until, at last they arrived in a city of a foreign ruler: Jerusalem. When they reached the court of king Herod, they were known neither to the king, nor to his courtiers.

Their arrival in must have caused quite a stir. Three foreigners arrived at the royal residence looking for a newly born royal heir, 'to pay him homage' (Mt 2.1-2). There was only one catch: Herod's three sons were adults. There was no recent birth to celebrate in Jerusalem.

Who were these trusty travellers that, without any hesitation, made their way to the first royal court on the star's way? They must have been men of some standing to gain immediate access to the king. Indeed, the third-century church father Tertullian, called them 'Kings' and, at about the same time, they were

immortalised in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem in beautiful mosaics that have survived to the present day. The mosaics show three kings dressed in the garments of the Persian royal family. And that's the first time that the number 'three' appears; until then there was only an unknown number of wise men, probably of royal descent; now there were three Persian kings.

A twelfth-century bishop of Cremona, Sicardius, was even more specific: he knew them to be 'mathematicians of the royal house of Zoroaster'. Although the evangelist Matthew neither named nor counted the travellers, by the Middle Ages they had gained names and specific roles. A manuscript in the monastic library of Mount Athos, named them as 'Caspar', 'Melchior' and Balthazar', and they have retained their names to this day. These three made their appearance at the court of king Herod and, our Gospel reading tells us, caused a commotion. There was no royal child to be found in the palace of the ruler of Judah.

Herod called his biblical scholars who ascertained swiftly from the prophecy of Micah that the child was not born in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem, and that the child was not to be a ruler as such, but rather 'one who will shepherd God's people' (Mt 2.6/Mi 5.1). It had never occurred to the intrepid desert travellers that the royal child they had been looking for might not be an earthly ruler, after all.

Despite their scholarship and their determination their wisdom hadn't allowed for the possibility that the child in question might not be of the obvious royal line. And they clearly had not thought about the consequences of their unannounced visit at the court of king Herod, either: 'King Herod was frightened', the Gospel tells us, 'and all Jerusalem with him' (Mt 2.3). And there is nothing quite as serious as a king whose authority and sovereignty is threatened, as the slaughter of the Innocents sadly documents only too well.

The travellers finally reached their destination, and

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Mt 2.11).

At last they had arrived. The long journey from the East had ended at the 'place where the child was'. Not a royal palace, but a manger, a fodder box in a stable in Bethlehem. A city no longer 'least among the cities of Judah', but exalted (Mt 2.6/Mi 5.1). Honoured not only by the birth of a heavenly king, but also by the visitation of shepherds and foreign dignitaries.

And, at the end of their long trek through the desert and their unwelcome welcome in Judah's royal house, they finally did what they had set out to do when they left their Eastern homeland. They had discovered the cause of the bright light that had arisen, the reason for the star they had tried to follow: 'his star'. And they 'opened their treasure chests, and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh' (Mt 2.11).

They offered royal gifts for a royal child. And while theologians have made great efforts to explain the theological significance of these gifts—gold to signify the child's royal descent, incense his divinity and high priestly office, and myrrh foretelling his death—the greatest gift, surely, must lie in the following. Just like the shepherds abandoned their flocks to meet that other shepherd—the one 'who is to shepherd God's people' (Mt 2.6), so the three travellers abandoned their homeland to meet that other king—the king who holds court in poverty and squalor, and rules from his manger throne. The greatest gift then, is that of following, of leaving behind all in order to meet the newborn shepherd-king. No precious gold, no fragrant incense, no priceless myrrh could be as costly as the gift of leaving all and following the call to seek the Christ; in the hope that he may be found.

And just responding to that call was costly. Yes, the wise men had caused their fair share of disaster on their way—did they not unwittingly cause the slaughter of 'all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under' (Mt 2.17)?

Yet here, at the manger throne, they presented themselves to worship the newborn king, and were accepted. The rich gifts they offered at the manger throne were not take away the human fallibility of the three travellers—their own brokenness, or the suffering and anguish their unwise wisdom caused to the people of Bethlehem. Only their most precious gift—the gift of their hearts—made them worthy of stooping down at the manger. The three came to offer what God had given them—their 'souls and bodies'—and offered it in service to God—as 'a living sacrifice'.

We, too, often come with our unwise 'wisdom' and our brokenness to seek God. Our material gifts may be poor, but the greatest gift we can make is not financial. The greatest gift we can make are those real gifts of the three travellers: 'hearts and bodies, gifts that can be far richer than gold, far more fragrant than incense, far rarer than myrrh—the gift of our hearts. There are countless opportunities for all of us to find ways of presenting ourselves as a gift in the service

of Christ. And I hope that you will use this Epiphany-tide to think about how you could be a gift. A gift exceeding all others, a gift compensating for our folly—our unwise wisdom—and our brokennesses. A gift worthy of the manger-king, the one whose star calls each one of us to enter into his service.