

A few weeks ago we read some of Luke's account of Jesus' birth and I mentioned that some scholars think we can look at these early stories as a kind of prologue to the gospel itself; a narrative that sets out the key theme of the gospel. Today we hear from Matthew. Matthew starts with a genealogy to show that Jesus was descended from Abraham and then David through the male line even though he too makes it clear that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived and born.

And then, in chapter 2, he goes straight to today's reading. No shepherds, no stable. But wise men from the East. We don't know much about these wise men. They may have been Jews, they may have been Gentiles. They were clearly wealthy and were either astronomers or astrologists. We don't actually know how they travelled, so no camels. That's a later addition.

The early church expanded into the east quite quickly, into what is now Syria and Iraq. It may be that the inclusion of these wise men of the East was to show that people from outside Judea were involved from the very beginning. Although he is careful to establish Jesus' Jewish credentials, perhaps Matthew also wants to show that this was the beginning of something which would affect a region much bigger than just Judea. Jesus is born King of the Jews but also so much more.

These three wise men headed for Jerusalem, assuming that a new king would be born there, but their arrival throws not just the palace, but the whole of Jerusalem into uproar. As we saw in Luke, the political climate is not welcoming to a new way of being, to the coming of the reign of Christ. In fact, it is absolutely murderous. We don't hear about it today, but after the magi went home by a different route, Herod decided to kill his potential rival and to quell any rumors about new kings of the Jews by killing all the male children under two years old in Bethlehem and surrounds.

Joseph was warned in a dream and took his family into Egypt as refugees. So Jesus survived, but many children did not. It's a strange thing how interconnected birth and death are. We think of them as opposites; one, the beginning of life, the other the end of life but they are closely related. A seed needs to die – to cease to be a seed – if the plant is to grow. Jesus died in order that we might have life.

There's a wonderful poem by T.S. Eliot, "The journey of the Magi". It describes how difficult the journey was for them and how uncomfortable. They often thought of going back but kept going and eventually got there. The final stanza depicts the narrator as an old man remembering how it was,

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Was it birth or was it death? For Herod, Jesus' birth made him fear death and led him to kill children and traumatize many families. Jesus' incarnation spelt death to the old system, death to the sin matrix.

Last week we heard the prologue to John's gospel, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Light is not always comfortable at first. I always sneeze when the light intensity changes. It's a reflex action, presumably developed at some time long before the invention of lenses that change with the light, to prevent my ancestors from hurting their eyes. We cannot look directly at the sun. When light comes, those of us who have been walking in darkness have to adjust and it's not immediately pleasant – we have to cover our eyes until we adjust.

Epiphany is the season of light – when the Christ-ness of Jesus is revealed. It is a time when we discover and re-discover what this birth means, what the God-made-human is like, what it means for us to become Christ-like.

As we move from the darkness into the light there is death. There is death to our former ways of doing things. Sometimes this is dramatic and sudden, but mostly it's slower and incremental. The Holy Spirit challenges us to come further into the light, to let go of an old habit, to develop a new one. But the old habit was comfortable and familiar.

We are used to viewing the world with cynicism. Negative remarks can be amusing. But we are called to be a people of the light. We are called to be the people of hope. Not Polyannas, but people like the prophets who see the good and the bad, the light and the dark and know that the light will shine in the darkness, that good must eventually prevail. There is no room for cynicism when God is present. In God's eyes, even the most boorish politician is beloved.

In the poem, the aging magi says,

...I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation...

The coming of the Christ child is indeed a cause of celebration and joy. But we fool ourselves if we think that the sin matrix – that nexus of personal sin and systemic sin which keeps humans trapped in negative patterns and which leads to great evil – we fool ourselves if we think that the sin matrix is going to give up easily. Herod is like the personification of the sin matrix – he is so

threatened by the new arrival that he attempts to kill him, indiscriminately causing tremendous pain and suffering in the process.

So it is in our lives. The old never gives up without a fight. The coming of the light is a time of birth but it is not what we expected.

...this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here...

Living a life of peace and non-violence in a world of violence is not easy. Yet this is our aim. The spiritual journey is one of constant death and rebirth. Giving up self in order to embrace Christ. Giving up our little ego selves in order to embrace the Self that we were made to be. Giving up what seems like security in order that we may become whole.

Encountering Christ, encountering the light. It isn't easy, but for us resurrection people, it is the only thing that makes life worth living.