

## ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 5 DECEMBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Isaiah 25: 6-10; Psalm 121; Matthew 2: 1-5



### “Peace? What Peace?”

This icon will be guiding us in our services until Christmas, and possibly even through to the beginning of January. It pictures the story of Christmas as it is told in the four gospels. The four gospels, who, each in its own way, have a different story to tell. The Icon brings those four stories together. There are the wise men from Matthew we read about today. There is the light of a new creation coming to birth in the darkness from John. We see the stable, the angels and the shepherds from the gospel of Luke. And we see Christ's baptism which begins Mark's gospel.

Because those stories have, in the minds of many of us, merged into one with the telling, we often don't realise that there are in fact four, separate stories about the beginnings of Jesus. Stories that are not, and never have been, intended to be read as so many parts of one puzzle which, if put in chronological order, will give us a historical account of what happened two thousand years ago. These stories are theological stories, not historical ones. They tell us more than just the facts. They try to show us what lies behind the facts. They have been created with the intention to tell us about a truth and introduce us to meaning far more profound than the superficial bare facts.

Today we concentrate on the story as Matthew tells it. Usually this story is told after Christmas, after we have read about the stable and the inn keeper, the angels and the shepherds in the fields. This time we have read it first, to enable us to read it as Matthew's first audience would have read it. As a self contained unit, not as an appendix to the story of Luke. Forget about that stable for a minute, forget about shepherds and angels and an inn. Forget about Augustus even and Quirinius the governor of Syria. For the moment, while we are getting into the story Matthew tells us, they are of no importance. What is important is that we have just been told that Jesus' roots go back three times fourteen generations to Abraham. That he is a Jew, through and through, with some very famous people in his bloodline, people a Jewish audience would have been familiar with and would have filled them with respect, even before he had said or done anything. This guy has an incredible pedigree.

In Matthew's version of the annunciation, it is Joseph who dreams of an angel coming down from heaven to tell him this child is special, is the long expected Messiah the prophets have been talking about. It looks like Matthew is writing for people who know the scriptures and banking not only on them being familiar with those 42 generations, but also on their ears pricking up as soon as they hear about a Joseph dreaming. From way back, at the time when Jacob's Joseph told his brothers about his dreams, they know that Joseph's dreams are dreams that come true, even if, at first instance, events seem to be taking a completely different turn.

And so Jesus is born.

Contrary to Luke, Matthew does not bother with any detail here. Nothing is said about circumstance or place. Nothing at all. There is the impressive pedigree, the dreaming Joseph and then we plunge straight into politics. The nations appear on the scene, and murderous King Herod, shattering the soft pink light of candles and swaddling clothes with power struggles, treachery and infanticide.

Matthew is a realist. He spends very little time at the crib site of little Jesus. He brings the troops in, both from afar and nearby. Kings with their trains, their soldiers and *Befehl ist Befehl*, ('orders are orders'), the unquestioning obedience that makes human killing machines possible.

Now look again, at those 42 generations. The revered forefathers, the great kings are there, but also Ruth the Moabite, next to Boaz the righteous, Rahab the prostitute, next to Joshua the conquerer, Tamar the alien who stood up for the rights of her family, next to Judah the heir of Jacob, Uriah the soldier, who gives his life in the service of his King and whose wife Bathsheba, stolen by that same king, gave birth to Solomon. Names and stories that remind the reader of the glorious history, but even more of instances where selfless and faithful living brought about peace and justice, healing and wholeness. Right at the beginning, in that seemingly endless summing up of names, we catch glimmers of what is to come, of the one who will be *the* ultimate example of that selfless, faithful and wholesome living that God calls us to.

The child that is born, the child that father Joseph dreams about is rooted firmly in generations of people who tried living the Messianic way. Some doing spectacularly well, some failing miserably, some full blooded Jews, but some others too who slipped in, sometimes in the dead of night to find cover under God's wings, or somebody's blanket. (remember Boaz?)

And then, in the middle of all that Jewishness, that Jewish history, that Jewish vision, this Jewish dreamer, suddenly these wise men appear. They have come from "the East". Traditionally an indicator of everything that was far away, foreign and exotic. A long, hard journey (see them push uphill in the Icon) brings them to a tiny little kingdom ruled by an insignificant little puppet king, seated in his palace, on top of the Temple Mountain, right next to the temple he and his family have put a lot of money into being refurbished. They are following a star.

And for those of us who have read our prophets we know that this doesn't only refer to Joseph and the Old Testament story of the big star and the smaller stars that bow to it, of worldly kings expecting the reverence of their subjects, but to the light that shines in the darkness, come to comfort God's people. "Watch it murderer, it says, comfort is on the way! The nations have come to the Mountain and you know what that means! There will be peace, the shroud will be taken away, the tears will be wiped off our faces, God's people will find salvation."

Look, Matthew says, Jesus didn't just happen. For generations the world had been preparing for him. Glimmers of what a person like him would look like showed here and there already. But he exceeded and fulfilled the dreams of those who'd gone before him. He came, in a world where Herod and others spread the gloomy shroud of violence and death and started another story. A story of love and justice, of tears being wiped away, of comfort lighting up the darkness and wise men come to bring homage.

Where Herod is giving his devastating orders the chance may seem very slim that this light will actually keep shining, this child will actually find a chance to grow and become a man, this dream of love conquering death actually becomes reality. But it's been like that from the start, says Matthew. The peace those angels in Luke are singing about is a peace that is happening. It is spreading itself amongst those who come to the mountain dreaming of another world, ready to make it happen, happy to listen for the voice of God whispering in the wind, telling them to travel along another route and ignore the Herods wanted by this world.

To travel towards that image Isaiah presents. The image of the mountain, of rich food and well aged wines, pain and sadness healed, death swallowed up by love, comfort brought to all who live in darkness. Of a future where Herod will have lost his grip forever and every nation will come and

celebrate a peace beyond comprehension.

Will it ever truly happen? Matthew, realist that he is, does not go into detail over that. Not as much as I have just done anyway.

All he does is tell the story of the beginnings of Jesus, weaving good and bad together, showing us, as his readers, where *he* can see glimmers of hope shine through, a dream come true, an old vision becoming reality in this person, Jesus of Nazareth, man of God, divine light shining in the darkness. Leaving it to us to pick up that hope, that dream, that vision and follow it to that place John talks about at the beginning of his gospel: The place where light breaks through the darkness and a new creation starts. Amen.