

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
NEW YEAR'S DAY
SUNDAY 1 JANUARY 2012
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Isaiah 60:1-6; Micah 5: 2-5a; Matthew 2: 1-12



“Messenger of Hope”

For those who can read between the lines, the beginning of the gospel of Matthew vibrates with references to the first Testament. This is no coincidence. Scholars believe this gospel was written by and for Christians with a Jewish background who would have understood the allusions and all their lateral implications without difficulty.

These allusions and their implications place the birth of Jesus in the wider context of the history of God's people and in the social, political and religious context of his time. Just like Luke, Matthew connects the story of the beginnings of Jesus, to the scriptures of past ages, the present of a people under oppression and the future of Jesus' life and death.

It is a highly political message.

Matthew's rarely read first chapter is a cleverly constructed wordplay of letters and numbers on the name of David, Israel's greatest King. Jewish readers familiar with the genealogy would immediately have noticed this structure, and appreciated it. Here it comes! The story of the greatest King of all, the one to whom all these generations of great kings, liberators and resistance fighters have been leading up to. Charged with meaning this first chapter alone could have landed anyone in jail for incitement.

If the oppressor had understood that is, which he probably did not. All those exotic names! Any Roman censor would have put the book down long before he got to the end of that list....

With that established we get to chapter 2. Right in the first verse we meet King Herod and some wise men from the East. Another political statement. King Herod was a puppet King serving the great empire of the West. He was nicknamed “the child killer” because he was so paranoid he murdered some of his own children on suspicion of high treason. The East, the place where the sun can be seen to rise from every day, in the scriptures and ancient societies in general traditionally linked with centuries of civilisation and wisdom.

The West is pitted against the East. The deceitful, fearful, brutal, murderous King Herod supported by the mighty Roman empire of the West against the Wise Men from the East. Wise men who know what this new born is due: kneeling at his feet with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they announce to the world that they regard Jesus as their King, their High Priest and their Saviour.

Way before Jesus has spoken his first word or performed his first deeds these people know to follow the light that marks him out as someone special amongst the stars.

Telling Herod, and anyone else who can't or won't see it, while these people can, from a long way off, they must be as blind as bats.

Herod gets the elite of the religious establishment together to either assuage his fears, or help him

find a way to nip this threat to his power in the bud. Their response is remarkable.

And another political statement.

The wisdom of the Wise Men from the East is put into perspective against the wisdom of the Scriptures of the Jewish people: There is more in those scriptures than even the East with all its ancient depth of knowledge and understanding can come up with.

The wise men are in the wrong text!

However much they may have read or instinctively understood Isaiah (the first prophet to welcome outsiders to receive the grace of Israel's God) they didn't get to the core of the promise that is about to be fulfilled here.

They look for the Messiah in Jerusalem, a place of power, of the urban elite doing well, of triumph and self sufficiency, of wealth and control.

Nine miles down the road lies Bethlehem, hardly the centre of any glamour or power. A peasant community that is easily overlooked. Way back, the great grandmother of David found her way here from Moab. A poor widow called Ruth, with nothing to her name, and no future other than to live off the generosity of locals. A story that barely made it into the scriptures - so obscure.

The future great King is not in Jerusalem, has not come to repair the old Kingdom, re-establish the wealth and power of the urban elite. No, he has come to rekindle the dream of a shepherd King who shall feed his flock and bring peace.

Herod's scholars tell him that Micah says Bethlehem.

One may wonder if they understand the deeper meaning of that statement. Perhaps they do, perhaps this is their tiny deed of resistance against this brutal King.

Showing him and yet not showing him.

Knowing full well Herod will only hear the word Bethlehem and go for it as a dog for a bone, while the other words, the words that disqualify his rule in no uncertain terms, will probably not even reach his conscious thoughts: he shall stand and feed his flock. They shall be secure. He shall be one of peace.

Clearly Herod, from these words you should either change your behaviour or stop pretending you are anywhere near a worthy King for Israel. In spite of all the display of power and mighty building projects that will make your name in history.

Before they leave, Herod secretly gets the wise men together to talk. Another blow to Herod's good name. In an honour-based society secrecy is a threat to honour. Where there is something to hide it can be assumed something dishonourable is going on.

Poor Herod. He does get a beating doesn't he? Even before he stoops to murdering a whole village worth of children (but that story is for another time). But so do the Romans and the religious elite he calls in to help him get a beating.

They figure opposite this new born King, opposite the values he impersonates, opposite the future

he represents. In all the murky dealings of a world full of brutality and fear there shines a light guiding those who want to see it to a place where vulnerability, humility, generosity, and peace reign. A place where outsiders are welcome and ancient prophecies speak with new meaning and promise.

Can you hear the message of hope ringing through these words? Brutal oppressors who think they can get away with anything are given warning that there is a wisdom other than their brutality. Prophecies they may have preferred to forget about suddenly speak with new meaning and validity passing judgement on their practices. Something as small as a baby proves to be a threat that can topple even the mightiest of Kingdoms, and don't they know it! And in and around it we see a force at work which is way above and beyond what any Herod, with or without the Roman Empire behind him, can do.

Someone has written another future in the stars. Someone whispers subversive guidance into dreams of great and ordinary men alike. Someone has started another history right alongside the history of the mighty and powerful. The history of the shepherd king has come to look after his flock and bring peace.

As we go into the new year that is all we need to remember: above, below, beside the day to day reality where Herod may be seen to be King there is another reality. A God as vulnerable as a baby. Divine power manifesting itself as compassion and care, the breath of the Spirit breathing peace and light in the darkest corners of our existence. Then, and now. Amen.