

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
Sunday 6 January, Epiphany
Genesis 25: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12
Rev. Anneke Oppewal



“A family reunited”

Last Sunday we heard the story that immediately follows the story we have read from Matthew this morning, the killing of the innocents. Today we backtrack a bit. The Western Church celebrates Epiphany today with the beginning of Matthew 2. The story has been carefully crafted, and is filled with references to the scriptures from the past, to Jesus’ and the Church’s future and to the context of the author, and first as well as future readers.

In Matthew’s story, and especially in the part we read last week, clear echoes of the story of Moses can be discerned. The mass murder of innocent babies, the one child that is saved destined to become an important leader and liberator of his people and the evil King. It is all there and easily recognisable for those who are familiar with scripture. But there are other references too – the prophets for instance, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and even the Torah.

One reference I’d never seen before, and that suddenly jumped out to me this week thanks to a Dutch colleague who drew my attention to the little known story about Abraham and Kethurah in Genesis 25. It is a rather charming story, and I felt touched discovering that Abraham is portrayed as someone who finds a new partner and happiness in ripe old age after his first love has passed away. As someone who has seen and experienced this from close by it made me happy to find a story about such love about one of the grandfathers of our faith. Old and well advanced in years, he gets a new lease on life and, in contrast to all the trouble he has had before with fathering families, he suddenly manages to father six more boys with this new woman. Old he may be, but this new love manages to ignite a new fruitful flame in him.

The six boys, with names that refer to nations at the border of the then known world amongst them, are sent to the East at the end of the story. Abraham does not want to put Isaac’s future in any more jeopardy than he has already done through sending away, and as a result, setting up Ismael against him. The six boys are sent away to the East, not empty, like Ismael, but with presents. In other words: they are not denounced, while the supremacy of Isaac as heir is safeguarded. As a woman of my time I may find that difficult, but I guess for a man of Abraham’s vintage that was probably a clever, sensible move for all parties concerned. The sons of his dotage are given a chance to start their own life, while his eldest son will not be hampered by their proximity, or be tempted to prevent them from developing to their full potential.

Six sons of Abraham, sent away with presents to the East.

Jesus, who Matthew is at pains to point out is a son of Abraham, receiving visitors from the East, from the place Abraham’s sons were long ago sent to. They arrive with presents. And although they have gone down in history as three Kings, the text does not put a number on them, but leaves it at Magoi, wise men, star gazers, from the East. They are drawn by the light that radiates out from this new offspring of Abraham, into the world.

Bringing three presents that indicate they recognise him as their King. Gold, frankincense and myrrh all played a role in Israel's coronation rites. Their High Priest (frankincense was used in worship in the temple) and their Messiah (who is referred to as the "anointed" by the prophets), as well as pointing to his death and resurrection where gold is paid for his betrayal and myrrh and frankincense are brought by Nicodemus to embalm him later on.

The story is riddled with references!

Why then does Matthew bring these sons of Abraham back? Or is it coincidence that these two stories connect in the way they do?

I don't think so. Once I realised the connection was there, it connected with a book I am reading at the moment about the early Church and the context in which Matthew composed his gospel.

One of their main issues was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Between the descendants of Abraham and those who came to faith from "outside". Throughout the New Testament there is this struggle between those who believe it was important for the followers of Jesus to embrace the faith tradition he came from, and fully adhere to the laws of the Torah and those who believe that accepting Jesus as Christ is sufficient. All the gospels participate in this discussion, Matthew more than most. Matthew's gospel is written against the backdrop of a congregation consisting of mainly Jews, who struggle to come to terms with fully accepting gentile Christians into their community. With Communion, the table fellowship, eating with non-Jews in a non-kosher setting, one of the most important breaking points between Torah Jews and ... Christians. Was the law obsolete? Was Abraham's faith still valid? Was scripture still to be revered?

It is in that discussion Matthew writes his birth story. Portraying Jesus as the new Moses, emphasising he is a son of David, the offspring of Abraham, the one promised by the prophets of old. In that context he indicates that those who come from outside, from the East, wise men and astrologers, representatives of other faiths and traditions, with presents that indicate they accept and understand Jesus to be the King, High Priest and Messiah, are no more and no less than long lost brothers returning from the faraway journeys father Abraham himself has sent them on. Better still, that they recognised the messiah even before anybody else did, in sharp contrast with the initial reservations and plain hatred and antagonism of the Jewish descendants of Abraham.

What we have got here, according to Matthew, is a family reunion. The light of Christ bringing together the family of faith by drawing them to his light. The light the prophets expected to arise at the arrival of the Messiah and bring the nations to his throne.

Thanks to people like Matthew, and Paul, and others who, in the early Christian tradition, were prepared to include and embrace those who came from outside, we now claim Abraham as our father, and a faith incorporating the scriptures, adhering to the law and the prophets, but not limited to those alone.

The light of Christ, according to the gospel, calls even those from afar to come and follow where it leads. Past the mighty rulers of this world to a vulnerable child, dependent on their preparedness to change direction for its safety. Past the palaces of the rich and wealthy to a house where a mother and child welcome, where a mother and child welcome long forgotten strangers as family into the healing, reconciling presence of the divine.
Amen.