

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY, January 3, 2010



“Just How Far is Orien-Tar?”

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12

Happy New Year! Help me out here: is it “Two-Thousand Ten” or “Twenty-Ten”?

This is a weekend for new calendars, new resolutions, and new stories, but I have to share an old one – one from a former parish that comes back to me every time I listen to this Sunday’s (which is also The Epiphany) Gospel.

The church I was serving at the time had a “clericus” of clergy nominally on staff, and one of the priests was a quite “proper high church” cleric who saw to it that his part in whatever liturgy we were celebrating was done well.

His part in an Epiphany evening “Feast of Lights” was to chant the Gospel, processing with full acolyte and incense escort to the center of the nave. The gradual hymn paused, he censed the Gospel Book, and began to sing the story of the Wise Men’s visit to Bethlehem.

When he chanted the magi’s question, “*Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?*”, and stopped to inhale, the momentary silence was broken by a child’s reply, “I know! I know!”

I cannot listen to these verses of Matthew without wanting, with that priest, to chant the next verse as, “*For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come pay him ho-ho-ho-homage...*”

And I have a whole new appreciation for “wisdom.”

This New Year also brings me a new job – some new work in the extended ministry we share as part of the church in the Diocese of North Carolina.

Bishop Curry has asked me to serve as his “Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer”, with all the rights and privileges attached thereunto. As far as I can tell, that means I get my mileage paid for when I attend “Ecumenical and Interfaith” meetings.

Unlike a few other churches that claim the name “Christian” The Episcopal Church thinks of herself as one among many branches on the two millennia old Tree we call the “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”; and we believe that we need to keep up a healthy conversation with other branches on that Tree.

We also try to stay in touch with the other households of faith with which we share the planet – the “other trees in the forest”, if you will. A not-too-deep study of history reminds us that much of the dysfunction within the human household (which, by the way, is what the word “ecumenical” basically means – “household”) happens when we *don't* talk and listen to one another.

Anyway, this new role will have me taking a seat in several of the official “dialogues” in which the Diocese is engaged – let’s see, there’s “LARC” (Lutheran / Anglican / Roman Catholic); The United Methodist-Episcopal “Interim Eucharistic Sharing”; a continuing dialogue with the Moravians; and a new setup with the Presbyterians will be getting under way before too long.

It will also, I hope, have me – and us – even more engaged with other churches and religions on an informal basis, especially when it comes to serving the world and incarnating the compassion that just about every faith tradition believes is a fundamental part of its creed.

Thinking about all this with Bishop Curry seems to have affected my hearing, because this past week, the Gospel for these closing days of Christmas has started to sound like something a lot more than just the call to replace the shepherds in the Christmas crèche with the Wise Men, and to flip from Luke’s story about Jesus’ birth to Matthew’s.

Do a little background work, and you’ll read how Matthew’s inclusion of this story about “wise men from the east” – and he is the only one who tells this story – was most likely a way for him to resound a promise made by the old prophets of Israel.

It was Matthew’s way of reminding his mainly Jewish readership that the day was close upon them when the children of Abraham would at last *be* the family through whom all humankind would be blessed; when the Mosaic Law of loving God and loving one’s neighbor would be universally known and respected; when the ideal Davidic kingdom of justice and peace would encompass the world.

The reading from Jeremiah we just heard – a reading unlike a lot of Jeremiah, with all his, well, “jeremiads” lamenting over and condemning the faithless and careless society in which he was living – talks about the restoration and exultation of God’s people, the great homecoming that awaited them in God’s day.

Matthew is telling his readers how that day is closer than ever, and adding the church’s new understanding that the homecoming is for more than just exiled Jews – it is a homecoming for *all* people; and he tells this Good News, as Jesus does, through a story, this story of “wise men” from another land who are the first to come to see the new Son of David, the new king who is to bring about this new, worldwide reign.

Church tradition picks up where Matthew leaves off. It wasn't long before his "wise men" become "kings," more obviously to represent "the peoples" of other nations; and then began to tell stories about and to depict the "kings" as an ethnically diverse trio of Asian, African, and European descent

Sadly, the number of "wise men/kings" got stuck at three (Matthew never gives us a number): maybe we ought to add a few more "kings" (and "queens") with even more different faces and costumes to the figures in our 21st century crèches, adding further global diversity to the message Matthew was putting onto parchment.

That's a lot of Matthew's message; but again, this new work to which the Bishop has called me has affected my hearing of this Gospel, because I think there's even *more* to what Matthew has given us in the dozen verses we just heard, more than perhaps even Matthew had in mind.

The image of the "Three Kings of Orien-Tar" (Do children who sing this song picture a country called "Oren-tar" that has three kings?) is the stuff of poetry and carols, of byzantine, high medieval and renaissance art.

As a work of art, what more might there be for us to see as we look at it, and into it?

It's been going on five years since my sabbatical time in India, but one cannot wander around that swami-, rinpoche-, guru-, monk-, sannyasin-filled country without it leaving an impression on one's imagination.

It's a place "in the east" with wise men (and women) a-plenty. Having had the chance to sit with a few of them in some real interfaith conversation, I can easily picture a collection of them, long ago, whose fingers rested on the spiritual pulse of the world, hearing of – perhaps even sensing – a new teacher, and a new – but somehow not so new – teaching.

I can easily imagine them wanting to hear more, wanting to make the journey – either physically or just intellectually – to listen and to learn more. I've become keenly aware in forty plus years of church service that one essential element of spiritual maturity is curiosity and openness to God's doing "a new thing."

And I can see these ancient "wise men from the east" recognizing in this new teaching, and in this new teacher, the **Truth** that shines through his words and his life.

Paul prays today that the Ephesians will be gifted by God with " ... *a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know ... the hope to which he has called you, ... the riches of his glorious inheritance ..., and ... the immeasurable greatness of his power ...*"

I think "wise men" and women of faith, back then, and still now, were, and still are "pre-blessed" with this gift, and continue in their spiritual pilgrimages to grow in understanding and appreciation of this gift.

There's something of a mysterious note with which Matthew concludes his story of the wise men. He tells us that "*they left for their own country by another road.*"

From however far they came, they saw what – and who – it was they came to see, and made it very clear with the gifts Matthew tells us they left that they were not at all disappointed, and then they went home. They take "*another road*" to avoid Herod.

We *don't* read that they were converted, that they renounced their heathen, Zoroastrian, Vedic, or Tantric ways to become Christians, or proto-disciples, or missionary bishops back home in Africa, Persia, or India (despite what is said about one of them in the movie "Ben-Hur"! That's Lew Wallace, not Matthew.)

Matthew just tells us they went home; and I've come to believe that they would have also gone "home" to their own particular faith traditions, to their own particular devotions: devotions to the self-same Truth that they recognized in the child, that they saw come to earth in Jesus; the self-same Truth to which they had been devoted all along; the Truth that, like Matthew's star, guided their path to Bethlehem, and, I now think, guided them home again.

The Truth *embodied* in Jesus is by no means *contained* within his short life and relatively few teachings: the Truth that comes from God, the "Word" that the evangelist whose Gospel we heard last Sunday says is "with God and is God" does indeed "become flesh to dwell among us," but that Truth, that Word also remains the "One God ... maker of heaven and earth", the One Truth to which all serious seekers aspire, the One Truth that is discoverable and available in many faith traditions.

A question put once by an Indian to a Christian missionary was about the generosity of the God about whom he was preaching. The questioner asked if this was a God who wanted to be known, who wanted to be revealed, who wanted to love and be loved by all. The missionary assured the inquirer of that truth.

"Then why would your God be so stingy as to choose but one place and one time for that revelation? Would that sort of God want to be discovered again and again among everyone, everywhere?"

To which the Christian's reply – at least yours truly's reply – would be, "... Ahh ... hmmm ..."

For I've come to believe that it is the *truly* "wise" man or woman – or child in the pews during a Feast of Lights – who seeks that Truth, and welcomes its discovery anywhere and everywhere it is to be found: a Truth, like star light, that is "*onward* leading, still proceeding, ..." guiding us all, at the end of our journeys, "...to that perfect Light."

AMEN.