

S1199 Carrs Lane 4.01.15 Matthew 2.1 – 23

What does the Epiphany story say to us about promise – covenant relationship – responsibilities renewed or taken on?

This is a story in which the star leads the magi into a new understanding. We know nothing about their prior beliefs or world views, but they arrive expecting a king in grandeur, and find a toddler in humble circumstances. Yes, there is safety, security within our godly relationships – that is a central part of the point of ‘covenant’ – but there must also always be space for surprise, the enlargement of world view, the possible need to change direction or expectation when we least expect it. In making promises, we celebrate openness to possibility, not constraint by fossilised assumed certainties.

This is a story in which the magi arrive in Jerusalem, and fail completely to see what they are looking for among the palaces, bustle and wealth of the city, or even in King Herod’s court. Instead, they find it in the domestic ordinariness of what appears to be an ordinary family. Herod, of course, gets a bad press – not least because of the latter part of the reading, entirely characteristic of others actions attributed to him: his rule was ruthless. Yet he did much which made him popular...up to a point. He rebuilt the Second Temple, where Jewish pilgrims came from afar to sacrifice...and which Gentiles did revere: a possible cause for the visit by the Gentile magi. Josephus, writing in ‘War’, says that non-Jewish visitors to the Temple acknowledged it as a setting for ‘cosmic worship’. High praise indeed. The sanctuary was completed in 19 BC...but the vast overall complex was finished only six years before its eventual destruction by the Romans in 70 AD.

Like or loath Herod, there is little doubt that Jerusalem was one of ‘the’ places to visit at the time of the visit of the magi – and yet wealthy Gentile visitors found what they were looking for in what appeared to be an ordinary Jewish family, soon to be rendered refugees by the one who espoused worldly power. Here, at Carrs Lane, we are surrounded – literally – by evidence of ‘principalities and powers’, contemporary equivalents of the Jerusalem Temple, in all its grandeur and illusions of permanence: temples of education – retail – transport, as HS2 comes knocking on our doorstep. Our promise-making does speak of engagement with such as this...but our commitments tangibly, demonstrably are also to the unexpected, the excluded, the marginalised...the refugee, the alien in a strange land, those who follow what seem to be odd belief systems. We do not make promises on our own account alone.

The Epiphany story is one in which the magi present an unwelcome challenge to Herod. Can there be another king of the Jews? Herod was already very insecure in his kingship; he wasn't from the royal line...and he was well aware of anonymous murmuring that he couldn't be the legitimate king, no matter how many temples he built. Power – as understood by many – is often very fragile indeed. Surprisingly so. Herod's misunderstandings and insecurities led to dire consequences...all to no avail.

The gospels teach us to view power in new ways – and this is a lesson which it takes the whole of the gospels to impart: here, we encounter only the 'warning shots' of a new world order – God's surprising ways. I acknowledge that we often feel powerless in the face of struggles with and within the world...but we make our promise this morning in the belief that we are powerful. We commit ourselves in the unshakeable belief that we can change things for the better. It is only a few weeks since we signed cards for Amnesty – we know that one person's act can lead to improved conditions for political prisoners.

I'm about to stray into an area about which I have written already for the February church magazine, but it seems appropriate to say something about it this morning. From the middle of the last century onwards, South America produced a number of individual people who took issue – at immense personal peril – with national powers and made a difference. Don't write off so-called liberation theology and the individual 'liberators' as dead and buried in 2015, however: I was fascinated – and encouraged – to read an interview with Father Alejandro Solalinde in the *Independent* recently. Another time, another priest taking on a corrupt government, another man who does not expect to live long, another servant effectively 'side-lined' by the church hierarchy. It is worth going online to read the full interview, but I was struck particularly by his succinct appraisal of Jesus (in the light of continuing struggles for openness and justice in Mexico): *'He was a brave and analytical young man who got in a lot of trouble by fighting for justice. He was a conflicted man, but he always overcame his fears'*. Some will be happier than others with this 'take' on Jesus! It strikes that Alejandro's reflection on Jesus, however, could equally well be applied to himself...and maybe as we promised to make a difference for Christ's sake, we need to allow something of this insight to breathe into our words.

In making promises, we celebrate our openness to God-given possibility; in making promises, we acknowledge anew our commitment to those who may be able to give us nothing 'in kind'; in making promises, we are saying that we believe that we can make a difference.