

## Epiphany 2nd January 2020

Matthew 2:1-12

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I have heard a fair bit of talk in recent weeks about saying farewell and good riddance to 2020 and a hope that 2021 will be a better year. By 'better' I guess people are thinking that this might be some kind of return to a pre-covid normal where we can all happily get on with our lives.

But the 1<sup>st</sup> January rather gave us a reality check with most states closing up their borders again to travel. We go back to a defensive manoeuvre. As we know, we are extremely well off in Australia. A friend of ours from Canada was telling us about the 3000 new cases in a single day in her province alone.

We sometimes forget in all the glitz and consumption of Christmas that Jesus was born smack bang in the middle of an ongoing crisis for the Jews. The Jewish people had been under almost constant occupation by various empires for 600 years. They looked and hoped for liberation. They expected a Messiah – a God appointed King to come and rescue them. The theological question was whether God cared. Was God ever going to act to liberate? Generations lived and died with uncertainty that things would ever get better.

All they knew was that when it came to liberation it was going to involve a clash of powers. Very few earthly powers or authorities give up their wealth without a fight. So the story of the birth of Jesus is a story of God acting subversively. Jesus is born under the radar screen of the well off and powerful. The first witnesses to the birth of Jesus are shepherds and fortune tellers, both rank outsiders to the mainstream of Jewish community.

It's sometimes said that the Jesus story is invented. No serious historian believes this, but on theological grounds alone, one of the many reasons we can be confident that people didn't *invent* the Jesus story is that the first witnesses are people of no particular social standing. If you wanted to *invent* a story then you'd make sure you built in some socially impressive and influential witnesses – probably well educated and powerful men. But the Gospel writers have little concern for such things. The

witnesses to Jesus' birth, as well as his resurrection, are rank outsiders – shepherds, Magi, and women of no particular social standing and men, like Peter, of shaky faith.

The point that the story is making is that, in Jesus, God is bringing about something totally new and totally unexpected.

It is not Politicians, nor chief priests, nor educated scribes that kneel at the feet of the Messiah. Neither religious power or state power have sufficient insight or humility to recognise the new thing that God is doing in their midst.

God's greatest act of healing and liberation, not just for Jews, but for the whole world, happened on the margins – under the radar screen. It commenced in a stable and ended on a cross on a rubbish heap outside the walls of Jerusalem.

On the face of it, the Jesus story doesn't sound like a victory does it? The Romans were not routed. In fact, just 40 years later the Romans marched into Jerusalem to confront a Jewish insurrection and razed the temple to the ground. And yet Mathew's Gospel is making the bold proclamation that Jesus's life brings healing - not just to Israel but to the whole world. While everyone else had their heads buried in *business as usual*, the Magi and the Shepherds had their eyes lifted to the heavens. They were expectedly looking for the new thing that God was bringing about – and they found Jesus.

Today we live in the midst of even more complex struggles, like Covid and climate change. The preeminent struggle for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is environmental. In the midst of these contemporary crises, where do we LOOK for God at work?

Can we find the subversive God in the small – operating under the radar? Four examples which occurred to me are these:

+ During the Global financial crisis that the banks that survived the best were small community owned banks that had not overextended themselves through risky greed-driven loans.

+ in the last 40 years millions of people in India have been brought out of poverty through the microloans offered by non profit community owned banks.

+ at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are less people dying in war, per head of world population, than at any point in history

+ a couple of weeks ago on Radio National program talking about the latest research coming out of ANU into renewable. Australia is on track to be 100% renewable by 2050 in a dramatic shift to renewables which is being led by the market and not by government. One of the chief engineering researchers at ANU said the government's policy on a gas-led recovery is an irrelevancy because the market is already leading the way in the shift to renewables including base-load storage using hydro.

Perhaps these are some of the emerging signs of God's creativity and renewal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are numerous examples of sustainable life emerging quietly from imaginative and creative people in out of the way places, a great number of them inspired and sustained by Jesus. Millions of people around the world are making choices about how to invest their money and what to spend it on, in ways that will be generative of life. Lies and illusions, greed and destructive power are being dethroned.

Rank outsiders like Magi and Shepherds noticed the signs when no one else did. Now the virus of God's healing love has been let loose into the world. If we've learned anything at all from the Gospel story of Jesus, it is that God operates subversively. Because of Jesus we know to look for God in hidden places. At the very least we can get on board, if we choose, with the agenda of God's emerging Kingdom.

When we think back over today or recent days or recent weeks, where have we seen evidence of God's quiet and subversive work?