



BELLVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Congregation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

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Epiphany

Matthew 2: 1-12

Acts 15: 1-21

~ **Brent Russell** ~

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- The word 'Epiphany' literally means the **shining forth**
- **A revelation, a revealing a showing**
- And **Friday** was the official date in the calendar of the Christian church across the world where we **celebrate the ancient tradition of epiphany**
- Often we talk of an epiphany as a **light bulb** moment
- **"I was standing there when all of a sudden I had an epiphany – bling!"**
- Not quite

Rest

- **Epiphany is the celebration of the revealing of the Messiah, this Jewish saviour, Jesus to the gentile world**
- Of showing Jesus to those **outside the Jewish way of life**
- And it is an important tradition to maintain and to remember
- **We forget things quickly and we need help to remember them**
- That is why we celebrate wedding **anniversaries, birthdays** and other special **occasions**
- **They are celebrations that remind us of something important**
- **As much as other festivals and celebrations remind us of special events and challenge us to certain action**
- **So Epiphany is one of the seasons that will remind us and challenge us**

- **The Jewish nation has been for centuries one of the most patriotic nations in the world**
- A **bond of nationalism** that has protected their **language, culture** and has produced a deep heritage of **tradition**
- **Patriotism has it's place and I think many of the whiter citizens of RSA could do with a bit of a boost to their belief and commitment to this country of ours**
- **For the Jewish nation however, patriotism has also not always made life easy for them**
- Since the very **beginning of the OT** even till **today** Israel's patriotism has led them to be **persecuted** by, **ostracized** from and in **conflict** with those around them
- Again and again their patriotism has brought them into **tension** with other nations around them from ancient times with **Babylon** to the current conflicts in the **middle east**
- **So whilst patriotism is a great ideal that many of us could and should experience a little more**
- It is also one of those things that **go easily wrong**
- **The Jewish people have often been guilty of an arrogance and pride**
- Heck, if God told you that you where the **chosen nation** it would be hard not to become a little arrogant and proud
- **We see this patriotism gone wrong often in our own land**
- In our own country when we get **angry and outraged**
 - about foreigners **coming across our border**
 - **taking our land**
 - **filling our jobs**
- Outsiders trying to find a home here face **xenophobia** because of the deep but **dysfunctional patriotism** we find in parts of our country
- **These same selfish, self important and condescending attitudes made it very hard for the Jewish Christians to share Jesus when he came**
- Remember **Jesus** was Jewish, **Paul was Jewish, The majority of the early church where Jewish**
- And in the Acts passage we see this **arrogance, this self pride, shining through**
- **"If you want to be saved you need to be circumcised" they where telling people**
- **If you want to get to heaven you gotta be Jewish**
- **The three wise men who tradition tell us are Caspar, Melchoir and Belteshazzar come to find this Christ child**
- They where **Babylonian astrologers**, who back in Babylon, modern day Iraq, where well know for their **"it's in the stars"** column in the **"Bagdad times"**
- **Truthfully the Bible gives us no indication as to how many wise men there where**
- Or where they came from

- We know that they came from the east and so **Babylon is a good guess**
- But other than that we know little about these **astrologers**
- These men were as far from the Jewish people as you could hope to find
- The only knowledge they would have had of the Jewish people would have been a distant memory of a slave nation in exile
- They were outside of the Jewish tradition and they knew nothing of the sacrifices, nothing of the prayers, rituals and rites of the Jews
- They would have had strange and wonderful clothes different to those of the Jewish people
- They were deeply involved in dark art of astrology
- And yet they are called by God to find the King of the Jews
- **In Matthew's Gospel the Magi find prominence in the story**
- **And they do so because right from the very beginning God's plan was to save the WORLD through Jesus**
- **Not just the Jewish people but all the world**
- **The early church made it hard for those outside the Jewish tradition to come to faith**
- **Despite what has been taught in the scriptures and spoken by Jesus**
 - **John 12** Jesus says he came to "**Draw all men unto myself**"
 - **Psalms 145** tells us that all creation and the saints will praise God so that "**all men may know**"
 - **Joel 2:28** God tells us that he is going to "**pour out my spirit on all people**"
- **This is and has always been the intention of God, to save the world through the Jewish nation**
- **God came to save people through the Jewish nation not to save them into the Jewish Nation**
- **And herein lies our challenge...**
- **Like Patriotism, any form of cultural elevation will lead to a dysfunction that will estrange instead of include**
- **Much of what we do on Sundays and much of the expectations we have of new believers is often more based in a Western-Christian culture or in church tradition**
- Have we as the church not set up **cultural hoops for potential followers** to leap through?
- Are we as the church not guilty too of this **arrogance** that affected the Jewish nation all through their history?
- **Have we not also expected outsiders to become immersed in church culture before they might meet Jesus?**

- Have we not as at times worked in contrary to the command of Peter in Acts 15:19 **"we should not make it difficult for the outsiders who are turning to God."**
- **Some of the early church claimed: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved"**
- **And we too have put cultural and religious expectations on people that have no place there**
- **We have expected people to be "circumcised" if they want to be saved**
- **We have believed that Jesus somehow belongs to us and we have the authority to determine the way and means that people come to him**

Outward appearance

- **The church has and still does set standards for dress that have little or no Biblical basis**
- That if you are **saved you will have to look a certain way**
- That you will wear certain clothes
- Even that **ministers** should wear certain clothes

Music

- The church has some wonderful music, **great hymns and evocative choruses**
- They are merely a **cultural wrapping of the lyrics of the Gospel**
- Some have tried to define certain **styles of music** that are **acceptable for Christian worship and others that aren't**
- **Certain instruments** for worship that are suitable and others that aren't
- **All cultural things**

Marriage

- We used to say that you had to be **confirmed** before you could get married and **some churches still hold to this**
- Rod and I will marry anyone as long they understand that it will be a Christian wedding
- But some parts of the church will make it very hard – these are **cultural things**

Pastoral care

- **Some churches make it very hard for outsiders to receive pastoral help**
- You must be a **member of our club** before we will care for you
- **We try as hard as we can to help any family in distress and many have come to meet Jesus through our care for them**

- **Jesus came into Jewish culture**
- But at every opportunity Jesus also **subverted Jewish culture**
 - In reaching out to the **untouchables** Jesus **broke the class codes**
 - In healing the **demon possessed** he **made clean** those who where considered **contaminated**
 - By allowing the **children** to come to Him he was **giving importance to the insignificant**
 - In giving the **bread and the wine** at the last supper he was **elevating relationship and confining religious ritual**
- **Jesus has often been seen as a cultural terrorist breaking out of the box of culture and religion where it restricted the message of grace that He came to preach**
- **And in doing so he has allowed people to find the fullness of God's mercy and love for them**
- **Jesus did not come to make us Jewish – but to make us His**
- **Our Job is not to get people to buy into Christian culture – but to get them to meet Jesus**
- **And so the challenge is to allow Jesus to be a cultural terrorist in our church and in our lives**
- **To allow Jesus to undermine anything, as much as we might love it, if it would make it hard for others to find Him**
- **I am not suggesting we throw out our church culture that is steeped in centuries of tradition**
- **But I am saying that we always remain vigilant that we don't expect people to meet OUR expectations of them or OUR expectations of how to worship God**
- **We need to allow the Holy Spirit to draw us into Christ so deeply that we learn a Christ culture not a church culture**
- **A church culture tends towards tradition in the worst sense of the word**
- **Church culture is predisposed towards legalism and fundamentalism that puts ungodly expectations onto people**
- **A Christ culture realizes that many things in our religious life are peripherals – fairly unimportant**
- **A Christ culture is focused on the centrality of a relationship with Jesus**
- **Christ culture tends towards compassion and generosity rather than legalism or cruelty**
- **Perhaps the greatest example of this is found in Mark where a man with a shrivelled hand was there**
- **The Pharisees where in Church culture mode and so had ostracised him because he was flawed – he was not allowed to worship like others**
- **And they would not allow Jesus to heal because it was the Sabbath**
- **Yet the Christ culture ignores the rules of men**

conclusion

- **The wonder and the marvel of the epiphany is that Jesus belongs to all...**
- **No nation or organization even the Church can lay claim to possessing Jesus**
- He came through the Jews, immersed in Jewish culture
- but his revelation to the Magi and the later faith of the early church proves the reality that He came to all the world to draw all people to himself irrelevant of language and culture
- In the midst of the darkness of the world, God calls these wise men to come to Jesus
- Through this dark art of astrology he calls them to come to Him
- The most unlikely of converts
- Yet they understood that they could belong to Jesus
- And so they asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."
- They were all created through him, and as such are His
- They need to come and bow before Jesus as the Magi did and worship Him who Ezekiel calls the ruler of the nations
- Him who John of the Revelation calls the ruler of the Kings of the earth
- He is the Christ and he has come to all the world, not to make them part of the church
- **But to make them His**