

Overwhelming Joy (for all the nations)

Is 60:1-6 | Ps 72:1-15 | Matthew 2:1-12

MATTHEW 2:1-12

2 *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”*

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (NRSV)

PRAYER

*May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.¹
Amen.*

¹ Cf. Psalm 19:14 (NRSV).

SERMON

I. JOY AND PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF HUMAN LIFE

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”² This is one of my favourite Christmas carols. This carol is regularly among the top 10 favourite Christmas songs in the UK and across the world.³ But what kind of joy is it?

There are many joyful traditions that accompany us during the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany. And these differ from country to country and from family to family.

(A sparkler is lit.)

In Austria many families hang sparklers on their Christmas trees. It can be seen as a symbol of the star of Bethlehem. The same star that guided the magi, the wise men from the east.

In my family there was another tradition. Year after year on Christmas eve my mother played a CD with Christmas carols by Mahelia Jackson. The living room was filled with innumerable candles. The light of the Christmas tree radiated light throughout the room. The whole apartment was filled with the voice of Mahelia Jackson. She sung with a deep meaningful voice “Joy to the world”.⁴ I loved the mood of joy and happiness that her music evoked in me. I am still mesmerized when I hear this carol and the mood and the feelings of these days return.

I also remember another tradition in my home parish in Germany. Around the feast of the Epiphany (6 January) it was and still is the custom to be visited by carol singers dressed as kings. In Austria and Germany they are called “Sternsinger”.⁵ I recall that I often was one of the carol singers during my childhood. It was a lot of fun to go to the families of the parish. And there was also a benefit and a treat. We collected money for charities and the people gave us sweets in return as a gift for our service. Especially the treat was an important part of the fun as a child. I still clearly remember the childlike unburdened feelings of those days. Is that joy?

35 years later it is not as simple as it was during my childhood. Opening the newspapers, watching the news or reading about human history one can ask if there are any good reasons left for joy today. In the last few days, an Austrian daily newspaper predicted

2 *Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd (2013), Ancient & Modern, Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship, Melody Edition, A&M, No. 72.*

3 Cf. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2013/big-sing-top-ten>; cf. <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/2021-popular-christmas-carols-7684841/>.

4 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vHF_lInuJQ.

5 Cf. <https://www.dka.at/sternsingen>; <https://www.sternsinger.de/>.

turbulent world politics in 2022. Flaring conflicts, countless unsolved problems and the pandemic were just a few of the key words.⁶

As a counsellor working for the Caritas in Vienna I am constantly confronted with problematic aspects of human life. Due to the pandemic many people are suffering and are experiencing difficult times, concerning their employment or financially. Migrants and refugees are constant reminders that there are many things in our world that need addressing. This world does not seem to be a very stable place. Nonetheless, as Christians we sing at Christmas and Epiphany, “Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!”⁷

What would critical newspapers have to say about such a government today? Is this world a better place since the Lord came? What kind of strange joy is this that still moves us as Christians after all these centuries?

II. LEARNING FROM A STORY OF MIGRANTS

Let us have a look at the gospel reading that we have heard:⁸ It starts with magi, wise men from the east. They are on their way to Jerusalem. The New Testament uses the word “magoi/magi”. The term indicates probably a group of Persian priests.⁹ At the time of the New Testament, the term had also negative connotations. It could mean astronomers, astrologers or magicians. To the ears of some of the Jewish readership of the Gospel of Matthew in the first century this may have been offensive. Because astrology is forbidden in the Old Testament, but it was widely practiced in the Middle East in those days.¹⁰ There are also negative and critical connotations in the Roman and Greek world concerning the profession of the magi. Some would have seen them as charlatans.¹¹

In our story the magi are travellers. Let us consider the magi as migrants in the widest sense as they move across the borders of countries.¹² In the eyes of some people they are maybe strangers with a doubtful reputation. Some people would probably not classify them as trustworthy witnesses for the birth of a new-born king or the Messiah.

With a view to the recent global migration phenomenon some attitudes towards strangers sound familiar. Interpretations of migration often range between chance and threat and between fear and hope.¹³ But in all the texts we just have heard migration has a prominent

6 Cf. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000132218988/aussenpolitischer-ausblick-auf-das-jahr-2022keine-zeit-zum-durchatmen?ref=rec>.

7 Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd (2013), *Ancient & Modern*, No. 72.

8 Matthew 2:1-12.

9 Cf. Daniel 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7; cf. D. A. Carson (2010), *Matthew, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Kindle Edition, Zondervan*, Ch. I. C.

10 Cf. Isaiah 47:13-15; Daniel 1:20; 2:27; 4:7; 5:7; Jeremiah 10:1-2; cf. Carson (2010), *Matthew*, Ch. I. C.

11 Acts 8:9; 13:6, 8; cf. Carson (2010), *Matthew*, Ch. I. C.

12 <https://www.iom.int/who-migrant-0>.

13 cf. https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/53924/file/Migration%2520narratives%2520in%2520the%2520Euromed%2520region_what%2520people%2520think%2520and%2520why_EN.pdf

role. The Isaiah reading was about great caravans of camels that will come from Midian and Ephah.¹⁴ The psalm we prayed together was about foreign kings who will serve God.¹⁵ The Bible is full of stories about strangers and migrants who played an important role in God's history with his people Israel and humanity.¹⁶

The magi like many migrants today start their journey because they want to find something that will improve their lives, and the lives of their families.¹⁷ Sometimes certain narratives move people to set off. For example, an Italian migrant in the beginning of the 20th century said, "I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold."¹⁸ The narrative that moves the travellers in the gospel is their wish to find the new born king of the Jews that they might pay him homage.

But it doesn't seem easy for them to find their way. They have to ask the local population for directions. They ask King Herod. As we already know, this was not the best address for information. In interviews with members of Christ Church some years ago someone said to me that it is probably quite typical for the experience of migration that you depend on the kindness of strangers.¹⁹ It is a risk and a challenge. But sometimes risk and challenge are the only ways that take you forward. Even if King Herod's help was not without ulterior motives he did help them by bringing them into contact with other influential people of the country. We might call that networking today.

Influential people in Jerusalem, the priests and scribes, shared more information concerning the Messiah with the Magi. They referred to a prophesy in the fifth chapter of the book of the prophet Micah. They explained that the promised ruler will come from Bethlehem. When he comes those Israelites who are in exile will be reunited with their people. His people will live in safety, because all the nations will recognize God as their ruler and he will bring peace. The enemies of Israel will be defeated. Israel will depend on God alone and not on their own strength or other human beings.²⁰

With the dubious help of the locals, with the help of the star, and the frowned upon calculations of astrology the Magi find a child with his mother. This child is Jesus and his mother Mary. Sometimes God writes straight on crooked lines.

When the magi saw the star they were unbelievably happy, they were overwhelmed with joy. And they brought with them some precious gifts. The bringing of gifts was a common

14 cf. Isaiah 60:6.

15 cf. Psalm 72:10.

16 Cf. vT. Nguyen/J.M. Prior (2014), *God's People on the Move, Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission*, Pickwick

17 Cf. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z8x6wxs/revision/2>.

18 Cf. <https://www.nationofimmigrants.com/in-memory/>.

19 Cf. F. G. C. Sauer (2021), *Migration und Versöhnung, Missionstheologische Ansätze aus anglikanischer Perspektive*, Echter, p. 84.

20 Cf. Micah 5:2-15.

practise at that time and in this region of the world.²¹ But I wonder what was the reason for their joy? Did they really find what they were looking for?

III. THE DIVINE GIFT OF JOY

The world wasn't a peaceful place when Mary held this little child in her arms. According to the Gospel of Matthew Joseph, Mary and the child fled to Egypt. They became refugees soon after the magi left them.²² The gospel informs us that Herod ordered the killing of the first-born sons in Bethlehem.²³ If Jesus was the awaited ruler how can this be the story of a mighty king of peace? But amazingly, our travellers worshiped the child.

Just a few verses before our reading, in chapter 1 of the Gospel of Matthew, the author points to the core message of the birth of the Messiah. An angel reveals to Joseph that all sins, everything that separates us from God will be taken away in this son of Mary. What the prophet Isaiah proclaimed has been fulfilled in this little child: He will be called Immanuel. That means "God is with us".²⁴

I believe this is the real source of their joy: God is with us! Everywhere! In this little and helpless child in Bethlehem God comes very close. God connects himself to our flesh and the frailty of our humanity. God enters his own creation. God limits himself out of love. He entrusts himself to the hands of human beings. He allows himself to be grasped. He becomes present in that which is anything but God. There is no more misery, no more powerlessness that has nothing to do with God. God is the humble one who meets us even in the smallest and poorest things of this world.²⁵

God encourages us to meet him among the poor, even in our midst, and among those with whom we have little natural affinity. He calls us to encounter him among migrants and refugees and among strangers, especially when people think that they have a doubtful reputation.²⁶ And we can seek him in the ordinary things like the simple joys of our Christmas and Epiphany celebrations and traditions.

The joy of this poor child in Bethlehem can become an impetus for seeking to overcome poverty, inhumanity and injustice, and also bringing joy into the life of others. This joy is really the divine gift to all the nations.²⁷

Back to the story of the magi: Yes, I believe these travelers from the east found something unbelievably joyful, something that is able to make this world a more peaceful, humane

21 Cf. Carson (2010), Matthew, Ch. I. C.

22 Cf. Matthew 2:13-15.

23 Cf. id. 2:16-18.

24 Cf. id. 1:18-25; cf. Isaiah 7:14; cf. Carson (2010), Matthew, Ch. I. B.

25 Cf. A. Rotzetter (2000), *Mit Gott im Heute, Grundkurs franziskanischen Lebens*, Herder, p. 22-33.

26 Cf. *Society of Saint Francis (2010), The Daily Office SSF, Mowbray, p. 815 f;*

27 *id.*; cf. Rotzetter (2000), *Mit Gott im Heute*, p. 22-33.

and just place. The gift of a mighty king. God gave himself as a gift. And gifted the magi returned to their home country, maybe to bring joy into the lives of others.

IV. THE JOYFUL MISSION

What can this mean for us as we embark on a new calendar year and during the Epiphany season?

I pray that all of us may have our eyes and hearts opened, like the magi, so that we come to recognize and meet God in the poorest and ordinary things of this world, and even to find him in the midst of the dark and difficult places in this world and in our lives, and that we may be able to receive the divine gift of joy, and be able to bring joy into the lives of others. Because God has no hands, but our hands. He has no feet, but our feet. He has no lips, but our lips.²⁸ Amen.

Summary: *Joy is a gift from God (for all the nations) that helps us to face difficulties; the source of this joy is that God made himself part of this world; there is no place where God is not present; we are not separated from God (Emmanuel/God is with us/saved from sins). We can seek, find and experience God even in the poorest and ordinary things in this world.*

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²⁸cf. Rotzetter (2000), *Mit Gott im Heute*, p. 96.