

Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Home by another way

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

I wonder how many of you have made new year's resolutions. Some new year's resolutions are about doing less - consuming less food or alcohol, being less critical or cynical. Other new year's resolutions are about doing more - being more mindful, more encouraging, more joyful, more hopeful. Some people make new year's resolutions believing they mark a significant turning point in their lives, as the transition of one year to the next provides an opportunity for life to be reset and renewed. It's like a secular version of a declaration of forgiveness, in which the sins of the past are washed away through the dawning of a new year. The arrival of January 1st is not merely the anticipation of the new but also the relegation of the old, perhaps to be ignored or even forgotten.

It's interesting to reflect on this in relation to the story of Christmas. The Christmas season usually features Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus, and the testimony of those on the margins of society who declare that his birth is a sign of God's favour. On this Epiphany Sunday, we hear Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, and its characters are not merely marginalized members of society, but foreign magi who travel from the east and ask: '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.' Gentiles announcing a Jewish king? That's a surprise, as is what follows: 'When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.' Historians suggest that Herod was paranoid and this explains his fear, but why all Jerusalem with him? It's easy to assume that the residents of Jerusalem share the reason for Herod's fear, but it could be that they're actually afraid of its consequences; afraid of the suffering that his fear will cause them.

In this regard, we note world leaders in our own time who manipulate political discourse to justify their use of violence. When they're challenged, they lash out at those who look, live or think differently - immigrants, the marginalised, the poor, and those who seek justice. This emboldens power hungry sycophants and patriots, and it silences ordinary people; stifling debate and dissent. Fear and division abound. Some might say it's human nature to observe things we dare not challenge; human nature to believe things we dare not declare; human nature to avoid controversy and not draw attention to ourselves; human nature to be afraid of those who have the power to hurt us; human nature to seek opportunity in the suffering of others. Some might call these the idiosyncrasies of human nature, but they are in fact born in the depths of our cultural formation. We are part of a culture that teaches and forms us to be fearful of difference, and even to take advantage of it when convenient.

We share this in common with the community that first heard the words of the apostle Paul. A Gentile community deeply formed by a culture of difference and disrespect with Jews now hears Paul declare that: 'They have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.' Paul claims that he's been called by God: 'to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ... so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.'

'The wisdom of God in its rich variety' is nothing less than the reconciliation of all humanity in the peace of Christ. One of Paul's great challenges is to convince both Gentile and Jew that God has given him authority to proclaim a message that seems completely new. But, even if the message seems new, it reflects an ancient promise.

Isaiah, chapter 60 declares: 'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.'

In the Advent texts, Isaiah hopes for peace; not merely peace to bring an end to war, like a truce or ceasefire, but peace that means freedom from the compulsion for revenge and retaliation; peace in which enemies are reconciled in order to bear witness to the glory of God. The gospel of Christ crucified and risen declares God's peace, not by ignoring a history of brokenness, but by entering into it; not by forgetting a difficult past, but by remembering it, because this is the true path to reconciliation.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the famous opponent of apartheid in South Africa, insisted that forgiveness was the only way to achieve reconciliation. In response to those who demanded a more punitive response, Tutu argued that the nation could never be healed by vengeance. Tutu believed that the truth about atrocities must be told, not to punish but to forgive; not to condemn but to reconcile.

In 2017, Australia's First Nations peoples gathered at Uluru, issuing a Statement from the Heart that included reference to Makarrata. This statement declares that: 'Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination. We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.' Again, this truth-telling does not wish to condemn or punish; rather it seeks to establish a story about the past about which all Australians can agree and be reconciled.

As members of the church, we receive God's peace through a particular act of remembering. One of the great signs of God's peace is the Eucharist, as we submit to the sustaining activity of God by remembering and giving thanks for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The practice of the Eucharist is a form of resistance against the fear of Herod and of all Jerusalem, in which we welcome the God who reaches out to reconcile a broken world. Our participation in the sacraments sustains us in the ministry of Christ, a ministry that is founded upon the self-giving of God, through Christ, in the fellowship of his Spirit. We gather at the table of the Lord, to be incorporated into the history of God's act of self-giving love, and become part of God's reconciling future.

Just as the Magi return home another way, so too does the revelation of the mystery of Christ send us on a new path of love and service, in which fear of self-giving is overwhelmed by God's grace. Let us, with the Magi, offer our richest gifts – the praise, thanksgiving, and adoration in which we participate in epiphany, and go home by another way, reconciled and renewed in peace.

To the holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons and one God, be all glory and praise, dominion and power, now and forever. Amen.
