

## The Bishop of St Albans

### Linköping Cathedral, January 2018

#### 1 Kings 8:41-43; Romans 1:16-17; Matthew 8:5-13.

We are so familiar with the events of the Epiphany that it is easy to forget just how strange and extraordinary they were. A group of unnamed foreigners – magi - travelling from far distant lands in the East to worship the Christ-child, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It would have been unthinkable for any self-respecting Jew to celebrate such an event which involved gentiles who had no knowledge of the law (the *torah*) or the prophets.

Likewise the theme which unites the three readings set for today might also have shocked many people in the ancient world. It is that God's love and grace is freely available to all people everywhere and at all times.

The passage from 1 Kings, chapter 8 quotes part of Solomon's great prayer to God at the dedication of the first temple in Jerusalem. Solomon begs the God of Israel to hear the prayer of a foreigner who has "come out of a far country for your name's sake" (v. 41). It would be tempting to interpret this passage as a prayer for refugees who are fleeing for their lives. More accurately, however, it is about gentiles who travel to Jerusalem as pilgrims, coming to the temple in an act of religious devotion out of respect for God's name.

Solomon's desire that a gentile's prayer be answered by God is "so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name, to fear you, as do your people Israel" (v. 43b). Solomon's prayer echoes the call of Abram, that "...all of the families of the earth will be blessed in you" (Genesis 12:3). It is a theme that will be picked up elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures and in particular by the prophet Isaiah (42:6; 49:6).

When we turn to our gospel reading from Matthew, we discover that it too is about gentiles, in this case a Roman centurion, who needs help because his servant is paralysed. In occupied Judea, a centurion was powerful. Here was an authority figure with a far higher level of social standing and leverage than a lowly Galilean rabbi. And yet the centurion recognises that there is something significant about this man from Nazareth. He addresses Jesus as 'Lord' and makes himself vulnerable by asking Jesus to heal his servant.

It is likely that this Gentile soldier knew that no self-respecting Jewish rabbi would ever defile himself by entering the home of a foreigner. To understand the subtleties of the original discussion, Jesus' response to the request is probably best translated as 'Are you really expecting me to come and heal him?' To which the centurion replies with evident courtesy: 'Of course not. I can't expect you to come under my roof. All I am asking is for a word of healing, spoken here where you are'.

The centurion's words surprise Jesus because he doesn't think that Jesus needs to be physically near the paralysed man – anymore than the centurion needs to be physically near his soldiers when he issues an order. Jesus marvels at the man's faith, saying 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant, we are told, was healed in that hour.

This is one of several passages in the Gospels where Jesus demonstrates in word and deed that salvation is not restricted to Jews, but God is open to the prayers of people everywhere.

With this in mind, how are we to understand the short passage from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Rome which we heard as our second reading?

As children of the Reformation, we all have certain passages of scripture which have been formative of our history and Christian discipleship. Romans 1. 16-17 is surely one of those passages for you here in Sweden because it was written on the pages of Martin Luther's heart. As a result I'm sure you must have heard so many sermons on this text, that as an outsider from the Anglican fold, I hesitate to add anything.

As I understand it, Luther wanted to underline the fact that it is not our efforts or our race or our ethnicity which is crucial to our salvation, but rather our faith. In Paul's words, it is "... the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

Paul's insight led Luther and the other Reformers to the view that religion is not about the human search for God; the endless attempts to reach God through our own efforts. Rather, God is the one who, knowing our helplessness, our self-centredness and our innate sinfulness, takes the initiative and reaches out to us in unmerited grace, simply inviting a response in faith. Grace liberates us from the burden of endless cycles of self-justification and generates within us a willing obedience to God's commands.

The Gospel places all individuals, all communities and all nations on an even footing. Contrary to what happens in war or conflict, none of us can claim to have God on our side, over and against others. There is no race or ethnicity - neither Jew nor Greek - which is superior to another. Of course, in every group and every nation there are a variety of cultural norms, some of which are good (and need affirming) and some of which are bad (and which need challenging). But fundamentally as human beings we are all equal in the sight of God. And I'm not talking about equality before God simply in terms of salvation, but in every aspect of human life.

This understanding has immediate implications. Speaking personally, it is one of the reasons why I am so profoundly dismayed at Brexit. I fear that our decision to leave the EU has been partly fuelled by an unhelpful form of nationalism, similar to the other expressions of nationalism that have been emerging in virtually every nation in Europe and beyond in recent years. As a result of Brexit I have recommitted myself to work even harder to get to know my European neighbours and to work closely with them for the common good.

Another implication of the Gospel is that we are to treat all people with dignity and with equality as made in the image of God with the same capacity to be transformed into his likeness. Whilst these three passages from the Bible this morning are not specifically about refugees, they do remind us that we need to treat each person we encounter as a person who has been created by and is loved by God.

Indeed, other parts of scripture go further and stress that one of the main ways that we will encounter the love of God is in and through the stranger and the foreigner. Think, for

example, of the encounter between Abraham and the three strangers at the oak trees of Mamre, where Abraham discovers that they are, in fact, angels or messengers sent from God.

This is picked up in the letter to the Hebrews where the writer says: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13.2).

Alan Jones, in his book *Soul Making*, describes visiting a monastery in the Egyptian desert where he was welcomed by an old monk, Father Jeremiah. He writes, ‘it was impossible to tell the age of this bearded Egyptian monk, but Jeremiah seemed very old indeed. The first thing he did was bring me tea and something to eat. Then he said with a deep laugh ‘Father, we always treat guests as angels – just in case!’

Think also of the words of Jesus in the twenty-fifth chapter of the gospel of St Matthew:

“Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

In this season of Epiphany as we reflect on the fact that it was three strangers from the East seeking wisdom who came to worship the infant Jesus, we rejoice that God reveals his purposes to people of all nations and all places. In welcoming ‘the other’, the stranger, the foreigner, we do indeed welcome Jesus Christ himself and are transformed through that encounter. To Christ be the glory in time and for eternity. Amen!

+Alan St Albans