

2 Jan 2011 A Chr 02

St Michaels Studio City

RCL Jer 31.7-14, Ps 84.1-8, Eph 1.3-6, 15-19, Matt 2.1-12

For The New Year

The year is new upon us, at least, the secular year; the church is already well into its year. Today is the last Sunday in Christmas for the church and points us to the baptism of Jesus next Sunday, the beginning of His public work. What can we take from today's Bible readings for the rest of our year? What wisdom of the heart and mind is ours from the Spirit of God working through our scriptures?

As often the case, the story of the wise men adoring the Christ Child is so familiar that it is easy to miss significance in the verses. The Evangelist Matthew, writing after the resurrection of Jesus and mindful of the enormity of God's power shown in that resurrection, uses his stories of Jesus' birth to show that God was from the beginning in Jesus and that the world recognized its Creator in Him.

- A. What we call the "natural world" pays homage to the Child in the star that announced His birth and guided wise worshipers to the unlikely temple of the barn in Bethlehem.
- B. The magi were priests of Zoroaster, a non-Jewish religion regarded with disdain and repugnance by the people of the Baby. Yet it is these despised ones who possess the wisdom to see and the openness to accept God working in unlikely ways, to know that the Creator of all is the God of all. And so they kneel in awe and wonder before a Child of the working class, and give gifts to the One who owns everything by right of creation.
- C. The shepherds are not part of today's reading but they are an integral part of Matthew's story. They represent the instinctual wisdom of God's chosen people to identify God's authentic presence and activity. That God should be acting in this Baby is to them both wondrous and commonplace: wondrous because God has seemed to be silent for so long and that silence and absence is now ended, commonplace because in their history and tradition this is how God works, choosing the unexpected and incapable in whom to work for the welfare of the people.

In a world that sneers at the idea of a loving God intimately involved with Her creation and people, I take for this new year the reassurance that comes from knowing that my

faith of God in Jesus has been witnessed by God's chosen beloved people, by God's other beloved people, indeed by the whole of creation itself.

Paul writes his letter to the Ephesians also from the perspective of the powerful intervention of God into the world in Jesus' life and resurrection. That understanding led to other implications in Paul's mind. If God had given Himself to the world in Jesus, then we of the world are fortunate, are favored, are blessed beyond all reckoning. The power of heaven itself works among us. That power recreates all that is, including you and me and every human person, healing the wounds, strengthening our spirits, forgiving our faults. In God's power we become innocent and holy. This is what God has intended from before the creation of time and space, "before the foundation of the world."

Some mistaken Christian theologies have seen predestination in an exclusionary sense: God chose a few and excluded the many, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. It is certainly equally as valid to understand predestination as God's choosing of all that exists to be with Him. That anyone exists is the evidence that she has been chosen by God.

Our part in the process is what we make of our chosen state: do we, along with God, create and beautify and love, or do we destroy and mar and hate? In our acceptance and trust, what Paul calls belief, God is enabled to work powerfully: we are enlightened or knowledgeable; we are optimists, for God works for the welfare of everyone; we are filled with hope, for God's intention of goodness cannot be permanently prevented; we are wealthy, for God gives us Himself and with Himself all of creation. And I am encouraged for the new year.

The truth-teller or prophet Jeremiah points us toward the results of God acting in the world: all is made right. The exile is brought home, the blind see, the lame walk, the child is born into security, all are consoled, for God is our Father and God is our Mother. We are saved from those who are stronger than we are, we are fed with the banquet of plenty, we are merry and joyful as young men and women are, our sadness is replaced with exhilaration, and we are satisfied more than we could ever guess. What we know of this world is not the end product but rather a work-in-progress. There is a *teleos*, a goal, a completion. We are being brought to a state that is of such happiness and fulfillment that our language fails to describe it. In this year, I will hold on to God's intention for our ultimate bliss.

This is a good way to begin the year. The next twelve months will hold for each of us challenge and hurt and triumph and joy. We will be sometimes discouraged and

depressed and at other times joyful and ecstatic. This is what life is about, and it is good. What is the best is that our year, whatever will be, is cupped in the hand of God. The Creator of the cosmos is on our side. The Baby in Bethlehem, worshipped by the world, loves us beyond all reason. That is the reason we are confident and optimistic. In God's time, in God's good will, in God's encompassing love, may each of us live a happy, blessed new year.