

Sermon - contemporary magus

Based on: Matthew 2.1-12

A personal journey of reflection

- Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany - the story of Eastern scholars, the magi, being guided by a heavenly light to pay homage to the one destined to be anointed as the Light of the world.
- In due course I will pick up on this Gospel story, but first I will take us through a journey of my own - a journey of reminiscing about part of my own theological heritage.
- I've been prompted to do this by the death and funeral of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.
- Reflecting on his life and ministry after I have spent decades in the UK and Australia has made me appreciate better Archbishop Desmond Tutu's influence on me - both directly, and indirectly through others who worked with him.
- I remember when Synod elected Tutu as the next Archbishop of Cape Town, which automatically made him the Primate of the whole of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, as the Anglican Church of Southern Africa was then known.
- There was a lot of discontent expressed in the parish I grew up in, because Desmond Tutu was known for having strong political views, and expressing them.
- He had already been advocating internationally for economic sanctions against the apartheid regime, and the majority of parishioners in the white suburb I was raised in did not want their economic status quo disrupted.
- True to their fears, Archbishop Tutu did indeed disrupt the status quo, and in other ways too - appointing clergy of the 'wrong colour' to live and minister in parishes where it was technically illegal for them to do so, due to apartheid's Group Areas Act - in the same way that it was illegal for him to live in the suburb of the archbishop's residence, but did so anyway,
- He pushed for the ordination of women to the priesthood, because he saw that fighting against discrimination needed to have a broader mandate than just racial discrimination.
- He was very distressed each time Synod voted against the ordination of women, stating that he could not fight against the social injustice of racism without also fighting against the social injustice of sexism - but it took a number of years to convince many of the traditional African clergy that the fight against the one needed to be joined to the fight against the other.

- It was during this time that I tested my own calling to the ordained ministry, and amongst my interviewing panel was Archbishop Tutu himself.
- I had to meet with him privately, and he asked me the most bizarre question: How would I preach the Gospel to a martian newly arrived on earth?
- I was able to make sense of the question later, but I cannot recollect that I provided any kind of coherent response in the moment.
- Nevertheless, he didn't write me off, and I was accepted for ordination training, which I eventually completed in Oxford.
- The main reason that Archbishop Tutu became a national leader beyond the remit of the Archbishop of the Anglican Church was that the Apartheid government had killed, locked up, banned or exiled many of the other capable African leaders.
- Desmond Tutu recognised that his position as Archbishop enabled him to step into that leadership vacuum, and that the government would find it too difficult to shut him down.
- Even though he was opposed to the Apartheid regime, he was also critical of any violence perpetrated in the name of black politics.
- After the transition to the first democratically elected government in 1994, Archbishop Desmond Tutu had a significant role in setting up the first restorative justice process - the Truth and Reconciliation

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Commission - which set out a different path to the more usual retributive justice process that is normally associated with radical regime change.

- While there are valid criticisms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as a Christian I have come to appreciate what a bold and necessary step this is - for *any* nation to be able to acknowledge their own human rights abuses, for a nation as a whole to be able to finally move on to a shared future together.
- One of the problems is that even Christians - besides those of other faiths or none - struggle to properly comprehend Christ's teaching and example of reconciliation, let alone actually apply it.
- Nevertheless, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has profoundly influenced me in two areas fundamental to my faith.
- Firstly, striving to hold people to account - including myself - and especially office bearers, whether in the parish, or at diocesan level - including our own bishops and archbishop - while at the same time praying that they might be blessed, and encouraged, and able to know and celebrate the love that God has for them.
- The second area is one where I strive to enact a combination the concepts of welcome and reconciliation - that everyone is to be offered God's hospitality, regardless of who they are and regardless of their life choices.
- No one is to be discriminated against for any reason whatsoever, regardless of their age, gender, education, ethnicity, sexuality, morality, beliefs or any aspect of otherness.
- This also means that those who have a problem with me, or I with them, are also to be made welcome - and this is where reconciliation is key: reconciliation is to be offered continuously, now matter how many times it is rejected.
- Sometimes these two attitudes of accountability and welcome might appear to be in conflict, in that when I hold someone to account for inappropriate behaviour then they feel unwelcome.
- But the answer is simply that we are not just individuals, but a community, and while each *person* is always welcome, damaging *behaviour* should not be tolerated, and people must be accountable for addressing this.
- Resolving the tension between accountability and welcome is achievable through reconciliation.
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu demonstrated over and over again that this was not only possible, but also fundamental to walking in the way of Jesus.
- And thus my own approach to ministry as a parish priest has been significantly influenced by him.

A contemporary magus

- But what of the story of the magi?
- Well, this is where my own reflective journey enabled me to recognise a contemporary magus in another South African Anglican priest.
- ('Magus'? you might ask. A magus was a Zoroastrian priest from the Persian region, and magi is simply the plural of magus, as in one magus, many magi.
- The wise men, or kings, of Matthew's gospel are just a contemporary description for the original Greek term.)
- And who might this contemporary magus be?
- Fr Michael Lapsley wrote on Friday of his participation in the preparation for Archbishop Desmond Tutu's funeral, and provided his own short eulogy - which I have included in today's service booklet.
- Fr Michael is a contemporary of my clergy mentors and colleagues in South Africa, and his own ministry under duress and his fight for social justice is an amazing and heroic story.

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- I am privileged to have attended some of his training workshops, and so I am able to connect personally with what he describes in his eulogy.
- Fr Michael was actually born in New Zealand, and trained for ordination at St Michael's House outside Adelaide, joining the Society of the Sacred Mission.
- In 1973 he went to South Africa.
- Like the learned magi of Matthew's gospel, he travelled from the east, under divine inspiration, to a place of poverty, social injustice, and political violence.
- Remember that Jesus was born also into poverty, social injustice, and political violence.
- You might recall that after the magi were warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, that Herod then sent his soldiers to Bethlehem where they murdered all the infant boys under the age of two.
- And the social injustice of Jesus' time was not only perpetrated by the Roman oppressors, but also by religious and political leaders who effectively collaborated with the Roman regime, in order to maintain the status quo that they benefited from.
- Fr Michael found himself ministering to those impacted by the apartheid state's violent response to the Soweto riots of '76, in his role of national chaplain to Anglican students.
- That year he was forced to leave South Africa, and initially settled in Lesotho where he became chaplain to the banned African National Congress.
- After a police raid in which dozens were killed, he fled to Zimbabwe.
- When Nelson Mandela was released from prison, Fr Michael was sent a letter bomb by the Civil Cooperation Bureau, a covert part of the apartheid security forces.
- Bear in mind that the apartheid government claimed to be a Christian government of a Christian nation, and were theologically endorsed by the state church - the Dutch Reformed Church.
- The bomb blew off his hands and blinded him in one eye.
- After operations and rehabilitation in Australia he returned to South Africa, where Archbishop Desmond Tutu offered him a ministry position.
- He became Chaplain of the Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture, and it was in that capacity that I met him.
- He was subsequently involved with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and then helped establish the Institute for the Healing of Memories.

Comparing magi and magus

- Obviously I am able to describe far more of Fr Michael's story than we hear about that of the magi that visited the holy family.
- Maybe after a few generations Fr Michael's story will also become as brief.
- But maybe his story speaks into the story of the first magi.
- What was it that compelled those foreigners to travel to the west?
- Was it the same kind of divine compulsion that inspires others like Fr Michael to travel to places of poverty and injustice, perhaps seeking to find the Christ amongst those in need?
- During their encounter with the political leaders in Jerusalem, did the magi recognise that something wasn't right, in the same way that Fr Michael could see that the regime in South Africa was morally corrupt - in spite of its religiosity.
- Even though they ended up at a stable, where an infant was sleeping in a manger, was their conviction that they were in the right place similar to that of Fr Michael who was convinced to stay in southern Africa, even after he had been forced out of South Africa itself?
- And finally, I wonder what the magi did after their experience in Judea?

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- Matthew's gospel says they returned to their own country, but I wonder if they were inspired, like Fr Michael Lapsley was, to build on their experience, and maybe offer new insights and teachings to their faith community.
- So I invite you to reflect on the stories that have been told today, of people from both ancient and contemporary times, who have been divinely inspired to journey, to step up, to engage with injustice, and to find ways of making homage to the Christ, wherever he is to be found.

Eternal God,
who by a star led Magi to the worship of your Son:
may the brightness of him who is the true light
pierce the night that covers the earth,
signal the dawn of justice and peace,
and beckon all nations to walk as one in your light. Amen.