



January 8, 2023

The Epiphany of the Lord—Christmastime

*"Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance."
Isaiah 60:3*



Dear Friends,

On Monday September 19 this past year Great Britain celebrated the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. She was not only the Head of State, Nation and the British Commonwealth. She was also Head of the Church of England. The Coronation Oath was established by Parliament in 1688. Queen Elizabeth took the oath in 1952. It states, *"I will to the utmost of my power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel..."* The role of the British King or Queen as both Head of State and Head of the Church is reflective of most cultures in the history of the world.

Ancient and many contemporary people do not make a mental separation between the religious and political spheres. The United States is the first place in history that has tried to separate the religious and the political. Religion is seen as part of the conversation in the public square. The United States was not established as a "Christian nation" but neutral, and open to all faiths.

This does not mean that religion is to be silent. All people of faith are invited to join the civic conversation. The faithful should appeal to the reasonableness of their religious/political positions. The U.S. Constitution does not ban or silence religion. However, unlike Great Britain, it does not establish one official religion. We listen to people of all faiths and even no faith.

Our passage from Matthew, is filled with political and revolutionary ideas. The dominant power of the time was the Roman Empire. It surrounded the Mediterranean Sea. From Spain to North Africa and out through the Middle East and beyond was the Roman domain. The Roman Emperor carried the titles "Lord" and "Savior." You can imagine the threat that was posed by Christians who claim that Jesus is "Lord and Savior" and comes to establish a new empire, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not just heavenly but breaks into history bringing with it divine justice.

Many Jewish people were also looking for God to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah. In our first reading Isaiah says God would establish Israel as the center of a new world order. All nations will look to them. These ideas led to two Jewish revolts against Roman domination. Rome would crush the revolts destroying Jerusalem and the Temple, the focus of these religious-political hopes. But the dream of a just world lived on.

Jews and early Christians were not the only ones who had hopes of freedom from domination of Western powers. The Magi were a class of religious-political advisors to the rulers of the Persian Empire (modern Iran). For centuries there had been foreign Western domination of the Middle East—first the Greeks then the Romans. The Magi promoted resistance to the Roman Empire. They looked for a King of Persia or in the East to overthrow the Western oppressors.

In Matthew's original story, the Magi, astrological powerbrokers, chart the horoscope of Jesus. They set out to discover and follow his natal star, they find and worship him, and leave King Herod and the political establishment in a panic. The Magi proclaim a message that was politically explosive. It went beyond the confines of Palestine and the entire Ancient Near East. Here in this baby is the new King of Kings. He will restore the true Eastern kingship.

The bootlicking, murderous, tyrannical Roman-puppet, Herod the Great, has every reason to squirm. To add insult to injury the story interprets the visit of the Magi to say that liberation from foreign domination is coming, not from the elite, but from a poor village in a backwater of the Roman Empire in Judea.

Christian tradition has overlaid the visit of the Magi with all kinds of rich symbolism. But we do well to remember that at the heart of this story (as in all the biblical stories) is history, politics, and human development. So, when someone says that the bible and our faith are not political, they don't understand of which they speak. We are to be about the politics of the Kingdom of God.

Christ is born!

Fr Ron

Esta carta está en español en el sitio web: www.anne.church