

*John Docherty, January 4, 2015*

## **Epiphany 2015**

This is Epiphany Sunday. It's a day that in some traditions is celebrated as Christmas day (the day when Jesus was actually born), and in some traditions (like ours) as the day when the infant Jesus was visited by the wise men from the East, sometime after his birth.

In either case it's a day of celebration; a day of revelation; of the revealing of the Christ child.

I frankly don't remember it as a particularly important date when I was growing up, but I suppose that's in large part because it was probably overshadowed big-time by Christmas, New Year, and my birthday.

Not to mention the fact that it would also normally be the last day of the holidays before going back to school on Monday. How depressing is that?

So maybe that's why I've shut it out of my childhood memories. It was lived in the fading glow of the absolutely best season of the year.

But that's not to say that I was unaware of Epiphany. I knew about the wise men, though their arrival was usually tied in with Christmas and traditional nativity scenes, alongside the shepherds, angels and donkeys.

These men, and their visit, were definitely in the picture.

But also in the picture, and very closely tied to the arrival of these men, was another event that I remember very clearly from my catholic childhood, though I don't know if the story was played up any more by us than by other Christian traditions.

It's a very dark story, and because of that, it got me thinking that I would use today's message as the first part of a kick-off of a series that the worship committee planned for this dark winter season. The series will be an attempt to focus in on areas of life that are under threat of some kind, that are fraught with

uncertainty or serious challenge, and we will be looking for signs of hope, inspiration, and light, in an otherwise dark time.

The various messages over the next few weeks as we approach Lent will be defined by the speakers who take up the challenge, but they may focus on things like the environment, the political context nationally or internationally, wars or other conflicts that are raging, youth and the challenges they face, race relations, intolerance of many forms, social ills of many sorts, injustice, etc. etc.

The title for the theme is “This present darkness”, and it’s taken from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 6, he tells them that “... our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

I know that that particular phrasing of “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” is language that probably feels a little uncomfortable in a setting like MFM. But I’d like to suggest that even those of us who are a little less mystically inclined (and I include myself in that group); those of us who are resistant to the idea of anthropomorphised “spiritual forces of evil”; even we can draw some inspiration from Paul’s distinction that our *main* struggle is not directly with our brothers and sisters, those with whom we share a common humanity, but with the forces, the tendencies, the pressures that push and pull us in every direction.

Some of those forces are simply the pressures of life in many forms. They are the demands on our time, on our patience, on our energy. They are not necessarily “spiritual” pressures, so much as physical, tangible, practical pressures that drain us, or frustrate us, or diminish us in some way.

Our response to those pressures can, of course, be couched in “spiritual” terms. How we manage the stresses of life is wound up with who we are; how we see ourselves; how we fit into the world around us.

But I think there *are* some pressures, or forces, at work that go beyond the simple demands of daily living.

And for that, by way of illustration, let’s go back to the arrival of the wise men who have come to worship this child.

I said that tied to their arrival is a very dark story, alongside the inspiring one of these mysterious strangers from foreign lands who have travelled far to *see* this child lying in a manger.

Our first hint that things will not end well occurs when they arrive in Jerusalem and inquire about the whereabouts of the child who has been born king of the Jews. We're told that when Herod heard this "... he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him ..."

To my mind, it's a bit of an odd reaction on the part of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I can understand why Herod might be troubled – he is, after all, the current king of the Jews, and it obviously can't have been reassuring to hear that somebody else outside the family has been born to take away his throne.

Less obvious is why the people of Jerusalem should be frightened, if, as we're told, there was a general sense of expectation in the Middle East that a saviour would come. At least, it's less obvious until we get a clearer picture of what kind of man this Herod is.

William Barclay, in his commentary on Matthew, offers some insight here. He says, for example, that when Herod reached the age of seventy, and knew he must soon die, "... he gave orders that a collection of the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem should be arrested on trumped-up charges and imprisoned. And he ordered that the moment he died, they should all be killed. He said grimly that he was well aware that no one would mourn for his death, and that he was determined that some tears should be shed when he died."

This is not a reasonable man. We're also told that his paranoia drove him to assassinate his wife Mariamne, her mother Alexandra, his eldest son Antipater, and his sons Alexander and Aristobulus. Barclay quotes the Emperor Augustus as saying that "... it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son ..."

So the inhabitants of Jerusalem are also frightened at the news of the birth of a child who is to be king, as they wait for the inevitable response from Herod.

And respond he does. This man who has assassinated his own heirs has no qualms about assassinating any other person who risks taking his throne, even though he must have known that he would be long dead before any newborn could possibly pose a serious threat to him.

And what does he do? He first finds out the approximate date of the child's birth, and instructs the wise men to find the child and then bring him news of the child's identity so that he, too, can pay homage.

But, of course, the wise men don't deliver the child over. They are warned in a dream against returning to Herod; leave by another route; and hope that that will be the end of it.

Herod is furious. And, knowing the approximate date of Jesus' birth, along with the place of his birth, he orders the slaughter of every male child under the age of two in the region of Bethlehem.

The slaughter of the innocents. This is what *I* remember of Epiphany – a ruthless murder of innocent children.

The estimated number of children massacred varies from 64,000 in some traditions, to just a handful. Some argue that Bethlehem would have been a very small village of only a few hundred inhabitants, with a likely population of infant boys in the village and surrounding area of only maybe 10 or 20. The low number of children would also then explain why no-one but Matthew even mentions the event.

But, of course, whether it's 64,000, 64 hundred, 64 or 6, it's a horrible counterpoint to the birth of a single child in a manger.

Matthew tells us that Joseph is warned in a dream that this slaughter is about to take place and he takes his wife and child to Egypt to seek sanctuary there.

Some writers pause at the idea that Joseph protects his own son but doesn't warn the other villagers, though we don't actually know whether he tried to warn them or not.

And *I* pause at this very dark backdrop to an otherwise joyous event. Where is the redemption in this paranoid exercise of power by a bitter and vicious old man? Where is the hope in the loss of these young lives, however few or many they may have been?

In fact, I suppose there is no redemption in this paranoid exercise of power. The darkness is all too present. The spiritual forces of evil, spoken of by Paul some forty or fifty years later, are very much at work here.

And that darkness is still very much present when Paul is writing.

And it is still very much present today. There are still far too many men, and they *are* predominantly, though not exclusively, *men*, who seek after power at any cost, and are quite willing to sacrifice anyone who gets in their way.

So where do we look for signs of something positive? Where is the hope? Where can we find tangible evidence that there is, in fact, light in this present darkness?

That's what we'll be trying to explore over the next few weeks.

We'll be looking for light in the darkness, and we'll be reaching out for inspiration as we sort out who we are as a fellowship of Mennonite Christians.

We'll be struggling with some of the challenges that beset this world of ours, and we'll be trying to understand where and how things can be different. More particularly, I hope we'll be grappling on some level with where and how *we*, personally and corporately, can make a difference, however modest that difference may be.

Maybe, as we look at where the challenges are, we'll get a better sense of what MFM is all about; of what we are trying to accomplish by meeting here every Sunday morning.

Maybe "accomplish" isn't the right word. Maybe the question is rather : "what are we trying to become by meeting here every Sunday morning."

In its harshest form, the question might be : "are we providing light in the darkness, or are we simply stumbling about; the blind leading the blind?"

Next week, I'll take the first stab at answering these questions.