

Australia on fire

Read: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#) [Matthew 2:1-23](#)

It's the new year and I wish that I could say that everything is going well in the world. But you know that's not true. The long drought continues in eastern Australia and towns are running out of water. Terrifying and out of control bushfires have been occurring in every state. Yes – we've had bushfires before – but not like this – or as widespread as this – or as destructive as this – many parts of Australia are literally on fire.

Pictures from places like Murrumbidgee look apocalyptic – blood, fire, columns of smoke, the sun turning black and the moon to blood – this is a description of the Day of the Lord from the prophet Joel – eerily accurate of the situation communities are facing. Who knows? Perhaps the plagues described in Revelation are all caused by humanity and the changing climate?

Where is hope for the present to be found, let alone hope for the future?

When we turn to our Gospel reading, there's not a lot of Christmas cheer to be found. In Matthew's version of the Christmas story, we hear about mysterious astrologers, a vengeful cruel king, frightened priests, a family fleeing for their lives in the middle of the night, and state-sanctioned murder of infants. It's the Christmas story we don't really want to hear ... the Christmas road less travelled ... the grittier, darker story that seems to resonate with the state of our world at the beginning of 2020.

[Jesus is born – and few notice](#)

Matthew actually says very little about the birth of Jesus – simply that Mary had a son and that he was named Jesus. Who knows about the birth – or cares – about this child of promise, born to be the Messiah? Almost no one it seems. Certainly not those in power, including Herod. Nor the religious leaders. The

situation is similar to the parables Jesus would later tell about God's kingdom ... a tiny seed has been planted that no-one notices or a pinch of yeast has been put into a batch of bread dough that appears to be doing not much. But in a mysterious way that typifies how God often seems to work, a few astrologers half a world away notice something unusual. These astronomers – probably from Persia – have seen a new star in the western sky and interpret it as a portent of the birth of a new king. They come searching for the child, calling in at Jerusalem for more detailed directions. They are steered towards Bethlehem, birth place of King David, Israel's iconic king.

Whether there are historical facts to support this story seems largely irrelevant. Matthew includes it to make several **theological** claims. First, despite all that seems to be going wrong, **God is in control**. God orchestrates the birth of Jesus, guides the right people to bring their worship, saves and protects Jesus. Nothing it seems can thwart God's plan.

*Jesus is rightly to be viewed as a **king** – the Messiah - hence the symbolic place of his birth and the gifts offered to him – appropriate for a king.*

Next, it is **foreigners** who come to offer worship, showing that this king is for **all people**, apparently in fulfilment of the Isaiah prophecy of the nations coming to the light of God's glory poured out on Israel.

Then there is **the struggle between good and evil**, as those in authority seek to kill Jesus – and innocent babies are murdered while others are forced to flee. This last point may just seem like the recurring cycle of history, but Matthew wants us to know that God is with us even and especially in the midst of suffering and inconsolable grief. There is a larger purpose at work behind the seemingly cruel and random destruction.

[Contrasting responses to Jesus](#)

So here in this early Gospel story we are shown that the good news of Jesus will be **contested** and that violence will never be far away. Those with power will wield it to maintain the status quo ... to maintain their positions of privilege and power. And that means eliminating any perceived threats to their power,

as Herod attempts to do. Later it will be the chief priests and Pilate who respond violently to the perceived threat of the adult Jesus.

There are still plenty of ruthless men in the world – and it is almost always **men** – who behave in a similar way to Herod. One has only to think of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, or Bashar al-Assad in Syria, or other iron-fisted regimes in Russia, China and many places in Africa. We may think that in Australia we are immune from such displays of raw power, but the secrecy and needless cruelty of politicians such as Peter Dutton – locking up a young Tamil family – Nades, Priya, Kopika, Tharunicaa on Christmas Island for months now – because he has the power to do so – and because it makes the government look tough on asylum seekers.

By contrast, Matthew highlights the faith of the magi. We know little about their background or their story, except that they have a **searching faith** and will go to great lengths to seek out the Messiah, Jesus. With little to go on apart from a silent star that appears in the sky, they seek Jesus out and are filled with joy when they find him. They **worship** Jesus and offer expensive and exotic gifts, which are highly symbolic of Jesus' identity and ministry. For Matthew, they are significant because they are not Jews and yet are regarded as wise.

Like many others in the narrative that will follow, the wise men leave rejoicing, having encountered the promised Messiah. Their lives are forever changed. Perhaps you know some people like these wise men ... perhaps there are some among us this morning ... **women** as well as men. I certainly hope so because in the year ahead I think we need people with wisdom, with a passion to seek Jesus and worship him, and with perseverance ... people who will listen for God's guidance – in whatever form it takes – and follow God's leading.

[Our world and responses to Jesus](#)

There is another feature of the story that resonates with our world at the start of 2020 which is the plight of almost 70 million refugees and displaced people. Most of these are ordinary people like Joseph and Mary who are forced to flee for their lives to escape persecution or violence. They are like my friends whom

I visit each week at the Detention Centre in Broadmeadows ... people who didn't choose to become refugees or to take the long and risky journey to Australia for fun. Almost to a person what they seek is freedom, safety and the chance to start a new life ... exactly what Joseph, Mary and Jesus do ... first when they flee to Egypt ... and then when they resettle in Nazareth in Galilee. I'm not going to share their names or photos with you because I post my messages on the Internet and I don't want their futures to be jeopardized.

I wonder how would the Gospel story have turned out if the Egyptians had not offered asylum and hospitality to Joseph, Mary and Jesus and they were forced to return to Judea?

Our compassion need not be limited to welcoming refugees but also being willing to go the extra mile to help a friend in their time of need and to help them hold onto hope and joy even in the dark times. This is a choice we make. But we make it knowing that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

I'll close with a few words from a wise old friend, who wrote in their Christmas card:

There's no hope for the world if everything depends on us. Thank God it doesn't, as the swaddled Christ attests. He came to save, and there is a future hope, but it remains for each of us to choose – daily – whether to respond like the wise men or like Herod. A decision to just lie low and enjoy life and family as long as we can would be a cop-out. May this New Year be a season of spiritual renewal for all of us, and recommitment to active service on behalf of others.
