

REFLECTION 7TH JANUARY 2024

“A change in direction”

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

Well, we have arrived at another new year 2024. For us it is a new beginning an opportunity to start anew, clearing out the old baggage of last year and making new resolutions to do things perhaps differently or even better, perhaps even relaxing some of the rigorous routines we might have had last year regarding, work and family, study, or even recreational time.

I don't know if you would call this an epiphany, but I'd like to think that I had an epiphany when I reviewed my Southern Cross health membership recently. I have been paying \$710 a month for several years, the older you get the more your membership is increased. I remember paying \$500 a month and now it had been increased by \$210. Last year I claimed \$1400 but paid \$8k in membership. Go figure?

My epiphany came after I had my accident in Auckland, and I was in hospital. I received first class care and treatment through our public health and hospital system at Waitakere Hospital in West Auckland. Being a member of Southern Cross had no influence or impact on my care. As part of my treatment, I was charged surcharges for dentist, GP visits etc. Southern Cross did not reimburse any of those surcharges. My epiphany as I'd like to call it is that \$710 membership fee would be much better off put aside into a health account of my own where I can pay for gym membership, a personal trainer, massage. A general well-being fund. It's a change of direction for me, it's about making

myself a priority for a change instead of propping up the Insurance companies in case you may one day need it. I know when I retire, I'm not going to be able to continue to pay such exorbitant fees then when I will need it the most. So, I've cancelled my membership.

On this first Sunday of the Epiphany, I wonder as you reflect over your life when you might remember when you had your first epiphany? I'm sure it wasn't like Archimedes, in a fit of jubilation leaping straight out of the bathtub and running naked down the street shouting "Eureka" I've found it, in his discovery of buoyancy.

But there must have been an occasion in your life when you had an epiphany moment. (if Laura and Melissa present when Louis was born on Thursday 28th December 2023). Sometimes we know when we have had an epiphany our life takes a completely whole new direction "yes, that is what I am going to do" and in some cases it means dropping everything and responding to that epiphany. It may have been the reason that brought you to Aotearoa New Zealand or to Wellington and even to St. Andrew's on the Terrace.

After we have all felt good about our generosity and best wishes for peace on earth around our Christmas trees, the readings from Matthew on the Magi which continue on to the slaughter of the innocent texts wrench us back to reality.

The epiphany for the Magi may not necessarily have been just in the visiting of the baby Jesus but more so in the dream that warned them not to return to Herod but to return to their country by another route. When the Magi did not return to Herod, it was only then that Herod realised he had been tricked or

outwitted. By leaving without even telling him, by taking another path they eliminated any chance Herod would have to be able to trace the location of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

We do not live in a peaceful world; we live in a world where children die and parents grieve—not just occasionally, but every day, not just in hospitals but on city streets and in mud huts. We live in a world where the oppressed suffer and the oppressors get away, literally, with murder.

There's no getting around it: Matthew's "slaughter of the innocents," as the church has called it, is a horrible text. Some of us may remember being taught "the Flight into Egypt" as children, usually in a matter-of-fact way, sometimes as an adventure story designed to make Mary and Joseph heroic, when in fact they were simply refugees. This was a very dangerous world for Jesus.

Today for many refugees and asylum seekers like Mary and Joseph their epiphany comes out of fear and desperation to flee to safer places, to seek refuge for their family's escaping warfare, terrorism, famine, oppression.

Life in this world can be cruel it can be subject to evil plots, schemes and acts orchestrated by power hungry people who themselves are possessed by evil and rely on evil to protect their power and status.

Herod had heard of the birth of a new King and called for the killing of all newborn boy babies. The massacre and slaughter of the innocents is an incident in the Nativity narrative of the Gospel of Matthew verses 16-18 in which he orders the execution of all male children who are two years old and under the vicinity of Bethlehem.

According to Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod was an extremely cruel man, who seems to have had no problems ruling by evil means. Herod ordered the execution of three of his sons (even Caesar in Rome is reported to have said it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son); and at his burial, one member of every family was to be slain so that the nation might really mourn. Much of Herod's anger lay in his own narcissism, his deep idolatrous love for himself. He was a puppet of Rome, appointed to maintain peace and order in Jerusalem on behalf of the Roman Empire, and was terrified at the thought of losing his power or position. Herod had a long history of fear and fury, his paranoia of potential threats to his throne. According to Boccaccio in the slaughter of the innocents 144,000 children were murdered.

The brutal face of Herod hangs over the Christmas story like a horror movie. It is about cruelty, an utter disregard for human life that we see again and again throughout scripture and throughout human history.

The slaughter of the innocents in Matthew is a fact of life for thousands of women and children who are the victims of violence in this world every passing day.

Even Mary and Joseph had an epiphany through a dream that Joseph had. They took another road and changed direction, they went to Egypt instead of returning home. They must have wondered what would life be like in Egypt? Could they adjust to life as refugees in a land where their ancestors were slaves? Were they destined to be slaves like their ancestors?

Such may have been Joseph's thoughts as he set out for Egypt. If only there were more dreams like Joseph's. If only there were more epiphanies

instructing poor, vulnerable people in the world today. If only there were more refugees finding safe places to flee to and live for a time. If only there were more innocent lives saved—especially the lives of children.

Today, we look to Bethlehem and we see the very same thing taking place between Israel and Palestine. So many innocent children have been killed it is history repeating itself. It is for the same quest of supremacy and power.

The Magi changed direction after having a dream which told them not to go back where King Herod awaited their return. We really don't know what it was like for them when they arrived back home. We can only imagine. But their message at Epiphany is about going home another way, about avoiding Herod.

What can we do to give voice and stand up against crimes committed against the innocent children in our communities. Violence today in our world comes in all forms from domestic abuse to internet abuse to stranger abuse. Even here in New Zealand we know of innocent children being abused by parents who are too stoned or drugged or drunk to remember what they were doing or so they say.

We watch powerless as international violence and terrorism explode across our lives, We hear the macho game playing of our leaders under the giant shadow of war and rumours of war. And we sense that the world is out of control, and we know that we must reach beyond this world for anything approximating hope. And beyond this world, there is only the mystery, the wonder, the star.

It was Albert Einstein who said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is

the mysterious." And it is that mystery, that wonder, that capacity to dream that we celebrate through the story of the Magi at Epiphany.

Being warned in a dream, the Magi decided to go back home another way, and so can we. We can resist the Herod's of our time who try to trick us into the subtle cynicism of believing that wonder and dreams and imagination are the venues of children alone and not for so-called grown up, practical men and women. Contemporary Herod's may be very smart, but they will not be very wise.

Contemporary Herod's are all those people, institutions, and cultural assumptions that kill the childlike wonder in us all. Herod's inside or outside us always say "It can't be done there is no way, you must never take a chance, everything you do must be useful and efficient imagination is worth nothing ... playing is wasteful ... do not follow stars."

I believe in this day and age it is part of our calling to be the Good News, to be the face of Jesus amidst a world in crisis. Amen.