

Normally, the birth of a prince, heir to the throne, is an event which is preceded by extensive preparation and great expectation. A whole nation awaits the arrival of this new-born child and when it occurs it is accompanied by joyous celebrations and festivities: a prince is born!

The narrative of the New Testament regarding the birth of such a prince differs in a number of important ^{respects} from the normal course of events. We need to be reminded of the fact that the expectation of such a birth of the King of the Jews had been prophesied more than 4000 years previously at different times by at least 40 well-known prophets of the nation. ~~It is~~ No specific date had been mentioned but these pronouncements had raised tremendous hopes - even a ^{measure} ~~kind~~ of political fervour - in the hearts of the people of Israel. And the more they experienced the yoke of oppression of the Roman yoke, the stronger grew their longing for the arrival of that day. The sigh of their hearts and the songs of their lips ~~was~~ contained the one word: liberation! liberation!

But if (we) (now) look at the actual event and the circumstances surrounding them we are struck by a number of vital differences to what would normally be the case when a prince is born.

1. Announcement by representatives of another nation.
 The dramatic news about the birth of this long-awaited child comes not from the palace, not from the main synagogue (the head office of the church), not from the power seat of the head of state of the country awaiting the birth - it comes from a delegation of astrologists ~~and~~ arriving from another country! What a remarkable situation & when the voice of the prophet has ~~become~~ ^{become} silent - either through the disobedience of the church or the oppression of the state - God ~~uses~~ ^{arouses} astrologists to proclaim the truth! How remarkable: when God's own people have blocked the flow of divine might, God uses the might of science to proclaim ~~the~~ a glorious truth which the religious leaders in their blindness were not able to discern! How many times in history have we not experienced that God uses the secular, so-called ungodly world to proclaim a truth which the religious leadership and community failed to discern!

2. Failure of the organised church to respond.
 It is understandable that the religious leaders could not have predicted or calculated the time of the birth of the Messiah - but it is truly unforgivable that after having met the astrologists and listened to what they had to say about the star and their journey // that there was no response from either High Priests or Pharisees or Sadducees or the Synod - no attempt to ascertain the truth, no joyful response to this announcement, no

~~the~~ church delegation joining in this pilgrimage - nothing! There was no church choir to herald & joyfully proclaim this world historic event - so God provided a heavenly host to ~~sing~~ broadcast the event over the silent fields of Bethlehem! There was no congregation of religious leaders joining in worship & adoration - so God provided a community of simple, humble ~~men~~ peasants to provide the praise!

When one reads the history of the Christian Church through the centuries one is forcibly struck by the fact that time and again the organised, institutional church ~~was~~ caught napping or asleep, failing to respond to the message of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit because it had become bogged down in irrelevant traditions or dogmas or because it had identified itself too closely with the existing political or economic status quo! And because of this blindness or wilfulness of the organised, institutional church God stirred into life small groups of Christians, forming their own communities to proclaim the message and enact the truth!

3. The hostile reaction of the state. We know the how how Herod the Great responded in seemingly sincere interest, expressing his wish also to bring homage to the new king whilst in fact already planning to murder this child. And when he discovers that he had been deceived he moves in with a relentless and brutality ~~typical~~ typical of all totalitarian & oppressive dictatorships ~~in~~ regimes in killing all children up till 3 years of

Here we are faced with a very important truth of relating to the role of secular governments - namely that there is an inevitable ^{conflict} between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms or governments of this world. For the nature of God's Kingdom is one of love, of truth, of justice and mercy, whereas in so many cases earthly governments and rules display or ^{easily} degenerate into a mix of hatred, of deceit, of lust for power, of travesty of justice, of selective mercy. And the church must recognise that condemnation and never try to deny it or to paper it over. History gives us many examples where the church failed to recognise this basic difference in principle and outlook - and where a heavy price was paid because of this neglect! Where the church is true to her calling, there will always be tension between church & state!

4. The crucial Test of true worship. Look around the circle of faces of those who entered the stable: dignitaries from the East, simple labourers from the field, an unknown carpenter with his devout wife, - Jews & non Jews, man & woman, intellectuals & labourers - all bowing in adoration before Christ the newly born King! Here in this humble structure, the True Church has come alive. A religious body which does not spontaneously welcome and include ^{its fellowship} all these groups - rich & poor, dominant culture or race, intellectuals & peasants, both sexes, all ages - can never be a true reflection of the Kingdom of God. Therefore when we sing - Christ is born in Bethlehem we in fact confess: this is the community to which Christ wishes us to belong!