

High Street Uniting Church, Frankston

The Mystery of Inclusion Matthew 2:1 – 12



I love a good mystery, in novels or on TV. The need to pay attention to detail and the demand for focus that bring that joy of solving the mystery. And it's not just 'who stole the painting?' or 'who killed the debutante?', there is mystery all around us. That tug of curiosity that Julius Sumner Miller captured in his catch phrase – "Why is it so?" 'Why is the sky blue?' 'Why does the moon look larger at the horizon than it does in the sky above us?' That tug of curiosity that makes us want to solve

mysteries drives all scientific investigation. However, that's not the only definition of mystery. There are mysteries that don't call for a solution, rather they call us to awe and wonder. 'How did people like us, with all our faults and foibles, produce such wonderful children?' 'How is it that, after all the mistakes, controversies, and corruption, and multiple languages and cultures over two thousand years, we still have communities worshipping Jesus the Christ and reading the words of the apostles?' There *are* mysteries, mysteries that aren't to be solved, but to be marvelled at.

Having given you 4 different definitions earlier, it's hard to call Epiphany a mystery, but it's certainly a puzzle. The mystery becomes apparent when the understanding of Epiphany being about the arrival of the Magi leads to celebrating the universality of the Gospel. Matthew didn't craft a story with just any foreign people visiting Jesus. 'Astrologers from the East'. He has, metaphorically called up the old enemy Babylon and the even older problem of pagan worship. How can people like that be in the story of the birth of Jesus! This is the 'mystery' that the Apostle Paul reflects on in writing to the church at Ephesus.

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

And this is indeed one of those mysteries that is to be marvelled at rather than solved. How is it that we, with no heritage in God's blessings, should be included in the wonderful revelation of God's invitation of grace in Jesus the Christ?

The people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, are called the chosen people. They are the receivers of God's Law, the beneficiaries of God's grace and favour and protection and the hearers of God's word. Despite repeated stories and examples and instructions to reach out to the wider world, to be the light to the Gentiles, the people of God divided the world between those who are blessed by God's, and those who are cursed and set apart from God. This word Gentile, that has become almost a meaningless 'churchy' word, simply means 'the nations', that is those who are not 'one of us'. And the very thought that those who were 'not one of us' should be included in the gracious message of love in Jesus Christ was a huge controversy in the Early Church. After centuries of being the chosen people, it was unthinkable that God would bless other people!

We read the stories of controversy as Jesus crossed boundaries, Peter's vision of the animals in the sheet, and all the angst between Paul and the other apostles and we shake our heads

at the hard-heartedness of the Jewish characters and wonder what all the fuss is about. It's difficult for us to get our heads around the fact that we are the Gentiles in those stories, and to understand why it should be a mystery that we are included in the Gospel. We have taken Jesus into our culture to such an extent that the gospel stories could have taken place in Kent! Not only do we have images of a white, blue-eyed Jesus, we have scriptural movies with clean, white actors quoting King James English! However, the crunch comes when you put the situation into the form of a mystery. 'How did the story of a Jewish itinerant preacher, crucified by the Romans, capture the hearts and minds of Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Goths, Celts, Britons, Saxons, and so on, when in nearly every case those doing the preaching and those listening were enemies?' The grace of God is a mystery to be marvelled at. It's not just about forgiving the sins of those who know God; grace goes before the preacher, even to places where God is unknown. And we are the beneficiaries of that grace.

But this message of Epiphany becomes pointed when we move from marvelling at the grace of God traveling across boundaries of nation and culture to get to us, to considering the boundaries we create. We who are Gentiles and only know of Jesus Christ through the grace of God, cannot fall into the trap of considering other people Gentiles to us! There can be no 'not one of us' moments in our ministry or mission. This is a troubling time for many people in the church as all the boundaries that we thought were in place for centuries come crashing down. It feels like the early church when Peter told his story of the animals in the sheet coming down from heaven. Boundaries of culture and language as we become a multi-cultural church, boundaries of age and decorum as we become an intergenerational church, and boundaries of sexuality and gender as we become a welcoming church.

This is the mystery of grace and inclusion that was apparent in the beginning when God created humans; there wasn't two creations, one for ordinary people and one for the chosen people. The mystery that came alive in Jesus as he ministered and shared with everyone – no barriers, no boundaries. The mystery that drove Paul's ministry and drove missionaries and preachers throughout the ages. In the grace of God, we are all included, and, as beneficiaries of that grace, we are called to pass it on. Everyone is 'one of us'. A mystery to be marvelled at!