

Reflection Notes – 8/1/17

- *Geoff Stevenson*

The Story We Find Ourselves In!

Early this week taking advantage of a public holiday, Susan and I ventured to Canberra to take in the exhibition at the National Museum of Australia called 'The History of the World in 100 Objects'. It was a fascinating exhibition that draws on 100 objects from the British Museum's vast collection and provides a sweeping history of the world through these diverse objects. Each object has a story, or rather stories. Some are known and well understood whilst others are mysterious and speculative. For example there is a coffin from Egypt (around 2600 years ago) for a woman called Shepenmehyt. Scans of the mummy inside show a male rather than a female. Who is this mummy? Why was he in Shepenmehyt's coffin? There are decorative features on the coffin that indicate much about Shepenmehyt and the expectations of the culture from which she came. Some of these are extrapolations by researchers seeking to piece together history and an understanding of an ancient culture – and to seek deeper truth.

Throughout the exhibit are stories. There are stories of the objects and some of the objects are stories, or communicate stories within themselves. There is an Assyrian clay tablet that tells the story from the Epic of Gilgamesh of a great flood. It is similar to the Biblical story but predates it. This is one of the earliest writings in human civilisation. There is also the head of a statue of Caesar Augustus, the first and greatest Roman Emperor. Augustus, like other Roman Emperors had statues and other images made and distributed around the Empire to remind people of who he was and of his power. The populace was largely illiterate so images were vital in communication. This head was originally part of a statue in Egypt and was decapitated by an invading army from Meroe in modern day Sudan. The head was buried beneath the steps of the temple as an insult to Augustus – this act preserved the head.

The stories from this exhibition draw together mythology, history and culture. Many stories speak into human life and describe an evolving self-understanding of humanity across the millennia. In many instances that which passes for history in our culture – some form of recorded factual truth that we believe – is often of little concern to the people responsible. Truth becomes something deeper and more profound and this profound truth can only be contained in story, whether written, sung or through art. Many of the exhibits had spiritual or religious elements. Sometimes, as with Augustus, there was the sense that particular humans were divine. At other points the divine was mysterious or portrayed in particular mythical forms, often through stories that reveal something about them. The great Pharaoh, Ramesses II recast history in favour of himself by changing or adding to the inscriptions of previous Pharaohs to glorify himself. This ensured he was worshipped as a god for centuries after his death.

The stories of humanity are often deeper and more profound than any of the particular events or even people they may allude to or describe. They lead us into deeper meaning of life and of ourselves. They invite us to reflect and provide deeper awareness of who we are and what life is about. We also use stories in such a way. We all tell stories and

emphasise or de-emphasise various elements to make particular points. We remember things not as historical occurrences, which are more often wrongly described, but as experiences that affect us in some particular way. We use stories to help explain ourselves, who we are and what we think or believe. Such stories help us enter more deeply into life.

So it is that I come to this week and the two stories that confront me – both from the life of Jesus. One story is really for Friday, the day of Epiphany, and describes the journey of magi (wise men) coming before the Christ-child (Matthew 2:1-12). We all know the story. We've sung it in Christmas carols, seen it in Nativity scenes and even joked about how many wise men could actually be found. We've either conveniently ignored the seemingly 'magical' star in the sky that moves before the magi and rests over the home of Jesus, or we have unquestioningly accepted it as real and miraculous... I wonder, though, whether we have really entered into the story to ponder what Matthew wants to say? I wonder if we have ever ventured into this other world of stars moving, astral phenomena, magi, gentiles, from the east bringing strange gifts? What does Matthew seek to communicate through his story? Evidently this story is unique to Matthew and unverified by other history. Does that matter? Of course not because it contains a profound truth. This star, whatever it may have been (or not), declares to the world of Matthew that the one beneath was the Promised One of God – the Messiah. This Jesus is the revelation of God and in him, his life and teaching, his dying and rising, we encounter the way, the path of God. The star was an ancient symbol of God's Messiah (see Numbers 24:17) and here Matthew uses it to reveal Jesus as Messiah. There are other elements to this story that give us deeper wisdom – the images of the magi draw upon Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72, both of which describe gentiles or kings from afar visiting and worshipping the King of Israel. Matthew names all of this at the beginning of his story of Jesus.

The other story we may read is from Matthew 3:13-17. This chapter is a large leap from the infant Jesus to the adult Jesus and his baptism. There is continuity expressed from the mission of John the Baptist into the life of Jesus and his mission in the Reign of God. John baptises Jesus, albeit reluctantly, in an act that demonstrated the upside down nature of God's reign where there is no greater and least. In this mystical event Matthew speaks of the heavens opening which, like the star in the previous story, speaks of the connection between heaven and earth and of the mysterious possibility that is to come in this one called Jesus. We are invited into his life and journey with him through his mission in the world to convey the reality of God's Reign upon earth and beyond. We are invited to enter into the waters, the subversive waters of baptism that will turn everything on its head and reveal true power as vulnerable love and compassion. We will discover that the heart of God is love and justice and true worship is to live with such love and justice. We will explore the ways of peace over violence and that faith is not so much what we believe as whom we trust and how that looks when we apply it in our lives.

These stories of Matthew have deeply profound things to say to us in our world and if followed may change everything. So perhaps take time to enter the story, walk around there and ponder its profound possibilities for you, us and our world.