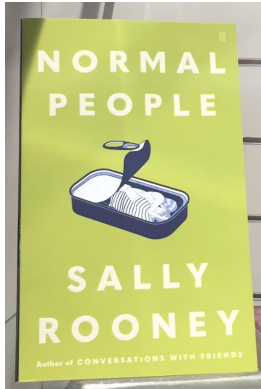


[1]

Visiting bookstores and browsing books is one of my family’s favourite things to do, especially due to Celine and Helen, my two daughters. Recently, when my family and I went to Melbourne for shopping, we visited a bookstore at South Yarra, and I found an interesting new book titled *Normal People* in its show window.



I have never heard about the book before, and do not know about the author, but the picture on the front page caught my eyes. The image of a man and woman in a tin seemed to show standardised people in the modern world. Contemporary people are easily being homogenised by education, culture, trend, or media. Like canned foods, people today are most likely to adopt similar style and flavour. Otherwise, they might be judged as being weird or abnormal.

That image of the two persons in a tin also made me to think about contemporary Christians and their life. For many Christians have been being shaped by some particular theological or denominational teachings and dogmas based on today’s materialism, humanism, postmodernism and secularism. As a result, the definition of true Christianity has become different according to those diverse theological directions, so that the church has been fragmented into diverse streams. So, it is very hard to reach a consensus on the true Christian faith. What is the real Christian faith?

[2]

This question is directly connected to the meaning of the Epiphany. Today is the Sunday of the Epiphany of the Lord for celebrating the first revelation of the divinity of Jesus after his incarnation. What’s interesting is that the Western and

Eastern Church has each focused on a different narrative, regarding the event of Epiphany.

The Western Church has stressed the visit of the three wise men as the first revelatory moment of the divinity of Jesus because through that event Jesus was manifested physically to the Gentiles. Due to its significance, many Christian artists have left lots of paintings containing the story.



This mural titled *Adoration of the Magi* at the Conception Abbey, Missouri, in the US depicts the theme of the Epiphany very well. The baby Jesus is sitting on his mother's lap and blessing the three wise men adoring his birth. The big star that had guided them to Bethlehem is still spotlighting the Messiah.

Look, like this the Epiphany of the Lord happened dramatically; God the Creator was incarnated into a human baby and born in a manger in the stable, one of the lowest places. But, God's incarnation was not a secret; it was not revealed only to some group of people. Rather, the divinity of Jesus was revealed to everyone from the beginning regardless of race, gender, culture or rank.

Today's Gospel reading, Matthew 2:1-12, shows well how the divinity of Jesus was displayed to the Magi through the Star of Bethlehem and also to others like King Herod and his people through the wise men from the East. In verse 2 the news of God's incarnation was heralded directly to the world through the Magi's question to King Herod: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

[3]

However, the opinions of Eastern Church's leaders and theologians regarding the Epiphany of the Lord were different from those of the Western Church.

They thought the baptism of Jesus as the critical point where the divinity of Jesus was manifested for the first time to the world. For in the event God the Father confirmed the divine identity of Jesus through sending him the Holy Spirit. The baptism of Christ has also been a popular theme for various artworks.



This painting titled *the Baptism of Christ* was painted by Marco Palmezzano, an Italian artist, in 1535. You can find this picture at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. Here John the Baptist is baptising Jesus with water, God the Father is above them as if he conducted the whole service, and the Holy Spirit is descending like a dove on Jesus as a sign of confirming his divinity.

This painting contains the story of Matthew 3:16-17: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

There might be lots of the crowds in the Jordan River when Jesus was baptised. Although everyone except John the Baptist could not have seen the Spirit descending on Jesus and heard God’s voice at that time, it was a critical time declaring the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

[4]

This discrepancy between the two Churches regarding the Epiphany generated huge differences in an understanding of the Person and Deity of Jesus Christ. This is not a theology class, so we will not unpack those theological differences

now, but at this point there is one thing we should not ignore regardless of which church's opinion is right. That is the fact that the Epiphany is different from the Incarnation. Some would say that the birth of Jesus looks same as the Epiphany because his divinity was already displayed when he was born on earth.

However, those two events are totally different; the birth of Jesus is a historical event, while the Epiphany of the Lord is an existential event for us to accept him into our life. If there is no time of the Epiphany of Jesus Christ in our lives, the event of his Incarnation has nothing to do with us.

We can find an interesting figure related to this truth in today's Gospel reading; he is King Herod. He was a Roman king of Judea including the area of Bethlehem. This was the reason the Magi visited him to ask, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” Then, King Herod called together all teachers of the Law and realised that it was prophesied the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, one of the towns he was ruling.

But, he was disturbed at the news rather than being rejoiced. And, in the end, with the fear of losing his position he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Look, he was one of the first peoples who got the good news, but he denied adoring the Baby Jesus and accepting him into his life. His denial could not hide or remove the historical event of Jesus' birth, but put him far from the divine grace.

Likewise, the Epiphany of the Lord is an existential time to meet Jesus personally and accept him to be our true king, which is an indispensable channel for us to fully taste the divine grace and peace in our life journey. The first event of the Epiphany happened 2000 years ago through the visit of the three wise men or the baptism of Jesus, but it is still happening among us as the moment to encounter Jesus the Messiah.

[5]

Sisters and brothers,

At the beginning of this reflection, I told you that the Epiphany is directly related to a question, ‘What is the true Christian faith?’ Can you answer the

“Historical and/or existential?” (Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12/ Jan 6, 2019)  
Rev Dr Jong Soo Park (Minister of Ocean Grove-Barwon Heads UCA)

question now? The true Christian faith is the faith experiencing the Epiphany of the Lord in our life-context. Only those who have experienced the revelation of the divinity of Jesus can become a true disciple of Christ. I wish you to encounter such a divine moment all the time in your life journey. Amen.