

SERMON ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURAL CEREMONY  
FOR THE INSTITUTE OF MYANMAR GRADUATE STUDIES

JANUARY 4, 2021

In the Christian year this is the week of Epiphany – literally meaning “to shine upon, to come to light, to be revealed” – Epiphany, a celebration of the recognition of God, incarnate in a baby in Bethlehem. According to Luke’s gospel, the shepherds had already come and “seen this new thing that had come to pass.” Now it is Matthew’s turn to tell his story of how God’s “new thing” came to be recognized.

We’re all familiar with the story – Magi, astrologers, wise men, kings as they are variously known, thought to be Zoroastrian, one of the most ancient of religions, followed a bright star calculating that something unique in the universe had occurred. Today it is known as the Christmas star, a confluence of Jupiter and Saturn, which until a few days ago was last clearly seen in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

A first stop took them to Herod’s palace, a seemingly obvious place for an event of such portent. Surely there they would find the new king that they were looking for – but not so. The star moved on until it shone on a shelter housing cattle and sheep, to a place where they found a young couple and a newborn baby – the place of his birth already exemplifying how his life, how the incarnation, God among us, God in the midst of a world of empire values – would be lived out.

Interestingly Matthew gives no indication that the Magi hesitated, wondering if the star would move on as it had a Herod’s palace. Surely this wasn’t what they expected yet somehow, in the way the story unfolds, there seems to be no doubt in their minds that they had arrived at their destination. Whether through insight, inspiration, or intuition, they **knew** this baby to be the meaning of the appearance of the unusual star and its movement.

How appropriate to have an inauguration celebration at this very time of the year. A new thing has appeared - Myanmar Institute of Theology, Karen Baptist Theological Seminary and Kachin Theological College and Seminary, together forming the Institute of Myanmar Graduate Studies, the first consortium of schools in Myanmar, the first consortium accredited by ATESEA, encouraged and supported by the Association of Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM) and the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia (FTESEA). Each school has a long history – Karen Baptist established in 1845, Myanmar Institute in 1927 and Kachin in 1933. Together you represent over 255 years of teaching and forming students with thousands of graduates serving as pastors, evangelists, as well as leaders in a variety of areas.

Call it insight or inspiration; indeed, whatever we call it, it was a moment of epiphany, an intuitive recognition of the possibilities of a new reality. At this time and in this place God has brought you together to begin a new stage in the formation and equipping of seminary educators and church leaders, a new stage through which you, with your ecumenical colleagues in sister schools through Myanmar and the Mekong Region seek to achieve even greater excellence in theological education.

It is a bold move in these challenging days. Nevertheless, the commitment has been made and hopes are rightly buoyant for what this partnership will accomplish: faculty development within the schools of ATEM, enhanced inter-seminary cooperation and partnership as well as an undertaking to share

resources throughout the Mekong Region. It was certainly a moment of epiphany that gave birth to this new reality.

As one who has given leadership for over 25 years within the Toronto School of Theology, a Canadian consortium of seven denominational schools, I know firsthand the give and take of such a commitment. It calls for a full measure of trust and cooperation, not just of the schools' leadership but also of the denominations they represent and their commitment to ecumenism and theological education. It requires a willingness to compromise, an acceptance of the others' point of view, a giving, and a receiving. Congratulations on arriving at this new day! What a great beginning!

But there is more to the Epiphany story. The wise men, says Matthew, made the decision to return home by another route, intuiting in a dream Herod's intention to destroy this new thing. At the same time prompted by a similar dream, Mary and Joseph took the baby out of Bethlehem to Egypt, God incarnate now a homeless refugee in a strange land.

Certainly, much insight and wisdom has been required to accomplish what has been brought into being, but I'm sure at the same time you are only too aware of how much more will be required in the years ahead. There are the perennial and often unsettling questions that will continue to fill your dreams. What type of education is required in this rapidly changing context with its urgent need for wise leaders who will work to bring justice into situations of violence and despair? What courses will best equip you to teach your students the things that form leaders committed to the values lived out in the incarnation? What qualities or characteristics need to be exemplified clearly in the lives of those who teach and administer this new thing? What does it mean to have a living curriculum?

We at the Toronto School of Theology, after 50 years as a consortium, are presently struggling with similar questions. We appropriated a European model of graduate education, seeing in it the promise of a more progressive world. However, at the same time we failed to see in its values and practices judgments that led to us dismissing others and other kinds of knowledge as less worthy. We failed to take as seriously as we should the multi-cultural, multi-faith society in which our theological education took place. Presently we are asking ourselves questions about the ways in which we construct and organize knowledge, about what constitutes knowledge, questions about what is learned not only from our taught curriculum, but more importantly, our hidden curriculum, questions about the nature of truth. We are at the beginning of what may be a steep learning curve as we reevaluate what excellence in teaching and learning looks like.

Here at IMGS I'm sure you already have your own list of questions, knowing they will challenge you in their uncompromising demand for a response. But all that is for another day. Today we recognize that a "new thing" has come into being and like the Magi we celebrate it with gifts, gifts of mind, heart, and spirit. And in this service of dedication we, ATESEA, ATEM and FTESEA, each of us in a different way your partners, commit to continue to accompany you into the future – a future that is open to God, speaking to you in what may seem like unusual ways or through unexpected or unfamiliar people, a future that will in all likelihood lead you to unanticipated places.

May the light of God shine upon you, leading you into the fulness of your vision. My deepest congratulations on arriving at this day. Amen.