

## St Mary's Mortlake 7 January 2018 - Feast of the Epiphany

Isiah 60 v.v. 1 – 6, Ephesians 3 v.v. 1 – 12, Matthew 2 v.v. 1 – 12.

In the Uffizi Gallery in Florence there is an unfinished painting by Leonardo da Vinci depicting the Adoration of the Magi. Behind the Magi, behind the child and his mother, there is ruin, confusion and conflict. Stone stairs in broken buildings lead to empty space. Horsemen struggle to control their terrified, rearing mounts. Figures thus distracted are ignoring the momentous event unfolding nearby.

No doubt Leonardo wished to suggest the collapse of the pagan world, but his treatment of the story reflects Matthew's. The backdrop to the Gospel writer's story is as dark as that drawn by the artist. A vicious tyrant rules. Innocent blood will soon be shed. Christ is born into a world awry. As at the passion of Christ, so it is at his birth. Those in authority, both in church and in state, dread the one who, were he to reign, would put down the mighty from their seats.

The obduracy of Jerusalem is contrasted with the openness of the East. Matthew audaciously turns a traditional theme – the haplessness of heathen quackery – on its head. Those who search the stars are more responsive to this new thing God has done than those who search the scriptures. It is as if the Egyptian magicians had outdone Joseph or Nebuchadnezzar's enchanters had got the better of Daniel. The first Magi may have come from Persia. Today they might perhaps set out from Glastonbury. We'd be appalled by their New Age superstitions, no doubt, and give them a lot of stick.

Matthew sees the Magi as the first of that great company of pilgrims from all the nations who at the last day will come to yield obeisance and obedience to this child. They are the forerunners of the many who 'will come from East and West' to feast at the Messianic banquet (Matthew 8 v.v. 11 – 12). They are the first of the kings of the earth to bring their glory into the City of God (Revelation 21 v. 24). If we'd had trumpets in church this Epiphany, they could have sounded a fanfare before that tremendous Old Testament reading: 'Nations shall come to your light; and kings to the brightness of your rising' (Isiah 60 v. 3).

The wise men from the East were, and remain, people of mystery. The Gospel has drawn the veil of anonymity over who they were. As with all mysteries, speculation has been rife, and legend has tried to fill in what the evangelist left out. Some have assumed, because of the three mystic gifts, that the number of Magi was three. Others have thought the Magi must have been kings precisely because of those prophetic words of Isiah 'Gentiles shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising' (Isiah 60 v. 3).

The Venerable Bede, with pious imagination, supplied their names, nationality and even a note on their personal appearance! Melchior, he said, was an old man with a long white beard; Caspar a ruddy and beardless youth; and Balthasar was swarthy and in the prime of life. The first, moreover, was a descendant of Shem, the second of Ham and the third of Japheth – the three sons of Noah and, according to Genesis 9 v. 19 the three main racial roots of humanity.

If Bede were right, the three Magi might be taken to represent anyone in search of truth, whatever their age, rank or race. Well, useful though these speculations have been to poets, hymn writers and the artists who have tried to paint the Epiphany scene, honesty and truth forbid us to take them as more than imaginary embellishments of the Gospel. Like their ‘solemn gifts of mystic meaning’, the Magi remain a mystery.

If the star led to Christ, then we can take it to be the star of revelation, well placed at the beginning of the Gospels, which reveal Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life. If the wise men were students of the stars and worshippers of light, then they may represent all who seek to find in Christ the True Light. If they were kings from foreign nations who knelt to the infant Jesus, did they see in him the Light of the World?

The star of Epiphany reminds us of other scriptural references to stars. Numbers 24 v. 17 says ‘There shall come a star out of Jacob’. 2 Peter 1 v. 19 refers to Christ as a ‘light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day star arise in your hearts’. And Revelation 22 v. 16 calls Christ the ‘Morning Star’.

The motivation of the Magi and the diligent spirit in which they persisted in their long search for truth, still inspire those who wish to make the journey of faith. Even at this distance of time, the Magi challenge heart and mind and will. The truth of God is not found easily. It demands an open mind, a determined will and a generous heart. The star of revelation was not shown to the cynical, but to men of faith, to the wise, the sincere, and those willing to follow wherever God might lead. The Magi, however primitive their religion had faith to follow; and they loved the light. The star they regarded as God given guidance, which they were ready to follow.

Josephus, a historian of that time, recorded the intense expectancy prevailing throughout the entire East, that a powerful leader would come from Judaea to deliver the oppressed millions. A light would arise for those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death. It was this expectancy of faith that made the Magi into pilgrims.

These were not just armchair scholars debating religion, but explorers ready to face hardship. With admirable courage and resolve they determined to follow the light

at whatever cost, and to continue wherever it led, and however long it took to find. Their quest proved to be neither short nor easy.

We sing ‘as with joyful steps they sped, Saviour, to thy lowly bed’, but often their steps must have been painfully slow. Their long journey over the mountains and across the deserts must have seemed endless. It took not weeks, but months and possibly years. If Herod, having questioned the Magi what time the star appeared, then slew all children in Bethlehem ‘from two years old and under’ (Matthew 2 v. 16), might that indicate how long their journey took?

Often, they must have felt like abandoning their search as time and hardship tested their resolve; but they had what the saints have called the ‘grace of continuance’. We cannot but admire their persistence. God rewards those who keep right on to the end.

We of the West can hardly credit men marching after a star. We do not have the Eastern mind, nor their belief in astrology. These men, however, believed that the destiny of humanity was written in the stars; and the sight of anew bright star would have made a deep impression. Here were men who had spent their lives studying the stars; and who pioneered astral navigation across the trackless desert sands. They were people of great vigour and of great intellectual integrity. They would go to any length to find a fact. And before we get too superior about their superstitions, let’s remember that modern mathematics and astronomy owe much to the ancient East.

The symbolic meaning of the Magi’s mystic gifts remains as great a mystery as the Magi themselves. Christian devotion looks upon gold as a tribute to Christ’s kingship, frankincense as an offering to his divinity, and myrrh as a foretoken of his saving death. But what lies beyond question is the inspiration the Magi have given to the worship of the Church down the centuries. In liturgy, poetry, music and works of art, the Epiphany scene has been set forth in matchless beauty; and the Wise Men have shown in what spirit we are to take up our personal pilgrimage.

So, remember not only their courageous intellect, but also their humility and reverence. They came to kneel. We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him (Matthew 2 v. 2). The greater the scholar, the greater their humility and reverence for truth. Kepler, the greatest astronomer of the seventeenth century, noted a bright new star, following the conjunction of the two largest planets in December 1603, a brightness which gradually faded after one year. Knowing the Gospel story and what a deep impression such a star would have made upon the Magi, he calculated backwards from his day to theirs; and estimated that a similar star might well have been seen at the time of the Magi.

In fact, the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the ‘royal’ or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new King of the Jews was about to be born.

We cannot be certain if this was why the ‘wise and learned men’ came from the East. But nothing is more likely than that thoughtful astronomers or astrologers (the ancient world would not have recognised a difference between these two descriptions), noticing strange events in the heavens, would search out their earthly counterparts. If, as it appears, they were also wealthy, they would have had no major difficulty in making the journey.

Now Matthew is not telling us all this simply to satisfy astronomical curiosity. Nor is he intending to tell the kind of cosy, picture – book story we have created for ourselves out of it, with strange, but gentle oriental kings bringing gifts to a child in a stable. Incidentally Matthew says nothing about a stable: as far as we know from his Gospel, Mary and Joseph were simply living in Bethlehem at the time. No, the overtones of his story are quite different.

What Matthew tells us is, quite simply, political dynamite. Jesus, Matthew is saying, is the true king of the Jews, so the incumbent king, Herod, is a false one, a usurper, an imposter. Herod the Great, king at the time of Jesus’ birth, died soon afterwards, as Matthew records (Matthew 2 v. 19); but his sons ruled on, and one of them, Herod Antipas, played a significant role in the developing story of Jesus himself. The house of Herod did not take kindly to the idea of anyone else claiming to be the ‘King of the Jews’.

The arrival of the Magi also introduces us to something else which Matthew wants us to be clear about from the start. If Jesus is in some sense the King of the Jews, that doesn’t mean his rule is limited to the Jewish people. At the heart of many of the prophecies about the coming King, the Messiah, there were predictions that his rule would bring God’s justice and peace to the whole world.

Matthew will end his Gospel with Jesus commissioning his followers to go out and make disciples from every nation; as the way, it seems, that the prophecies of the Messiah’s world – wide rule are going to come true. So here, even when Jesus is an apparently unknown baby, there is a sign of what is to come.

Finally, there is another way in which this story points ahead to the climax of the Gospel. Jesus will come face to face with another Gentile, the representative of the world’s greatest king – Pilate, the Roman Governor and subordinate of Tiberius Caesar. Pilate will have rather different gifts to give him, although he too will be warned through his wife’s dream not to do anything to Jesus (Matthew 27 v. 19). Pilate’s Roman soldiers are the first Gentiles since the Magi to call Jesus ‘King of

the Jews' (Matthew 27 v. 29), but the crown they give him is made of thorns, and the throne they provide is a cross.

At that moment, instead of a bright star, there will be an unearthly darkness (Matthew 27 v. 45), out of which we shall hear Gentiles, the centurion and Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross, saying with one voice 'Truly, this man was the Son of God' (Matthew 27 v. 54).

Listen to the whole story, Matthew is saying. Think about what it means for Jesus to be the true king of the Jews. And then – come to him, by whatever route you can, and with the best gifts you can find.

As Christina Rossetti put it and as we sing at this point in the year:

'What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can, I give him: Give him my heart.'

Amen