

“Epiphany – bow down and worship”

Sunday 4 January 2009

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-9

Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon

A great mythology has sprung up around the coming of the Wise Men ... through carols that take a certain amount of liberty with the scriptures, through Christmas card images and through school nativity plays. The reality is that all we have to go on is just these twelve verses from Matthew's gospel, and those little hints in chapter 60 of Isaiah's prophecy:

"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (v3)

and

"Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praises of the Lord." (v6)

... all of which is only partially fulfilled by these mysterious people who came looking for the King of the Jews.

So ... what of these Wise Men ...

- How many were there?
- Where did they come from?
- How long had they travelled?

There's a great deal we don't know ... but there is also much we can learn!

So let's see what we can discover.

W Who were they?

The word 'Magi' is a difficult word. According to my Greek Lexicon it means something like sage, magician, or sorcerer ... but that could lead us to some wrong conclusions. Clearly they were astronomers, who studied the stars ... almost certainly they were some kind of astrologers, who understood the movements of the stars to have meaning ... real relevance to what was happening here on earth.

These men were not Jews, and God does not deal with them as though they were Jews to whom his truth had been revealed. In various places Scripture condemns astrology, along with horoscopes, spiritism and every kind of magical art ... but these men came from far away, and though they obviously had some knowledge of the God of the Jews, they were not themselves members of the Chosen People.

So ... they were star-gazers ... learned men ... almost certainly wealthy, considering the extravagant gifts they brought with them ... and they were 'from the east'. The most likely place is Persia ... or modern-day Iran ... where Jews had spent long years in exile, and their culture had become known. Other possibilities are Iraq, or even

India. Either way, they had travelled a great distance to come to the court of Herod the Great, in Jerusalem.

I What was their **Intention**?

What had motivated these men to make a long, doubtless tiring and almost certainly dangerous journey through difficult terrain to an unknown land? Why did they come?

The Magi came to Herod's Court to make an inquiry:

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"

We can understand something of Herod's reaction. Herod the Great was a powerful king, despite the Roman occupation. He was himself pro-Roman ... more Roman than the Romans themselves. He loved the high life ... the extravagance of his royal lifestyle ... the palaces, the servants, the good food and the fine wine ... and he was ruthless enough to do whatever he felt was necessary to maintain what he so much enjoyed. He had not held back from eliminating members of his own family who threatened his position. He was certainly not in the mood to be challenged by some pretender to his throne.

If you want to consider a modern-day equivalent for Herod, consider Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe. Autocratic, ruthless, and power-hungry to the point of obsession. So Herod was not in the mood to risk any kind of political unrest ... he had enough to content with in keeping the Romans happy and the natives subdued ... there were enough hopeful Messiahs around to stir things up as it was. A new King was not good news – not even an infant king.

So the Magi's question: *"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews"* was deeply unsettling. Matthew tells us that Herod was 'disturbed ... and all Jerusalem with him' ... by which we should understand that Herod's minions shared in his concern ... all those who would stand to lose out by a change of reigning monarch. Regime change is seldom good news for the hangers-on, so they were most likely to vote for the status-quo.

Notice the Magi did not ask about one born *to be* king ... but the one *who had been born king*. They had not come all this way out of idle curiosity, nor as tourists, nor on some sort of scientific endeavour to determine whether the stars were to be trusted. They were not looking for a future King, but a present one ... they had come to worship him, but they didn't find him in Jerusalem.

CHALLENGE 1 Why do we come? Do we come out of habit? ... or Curiosity? ... or do we come to worship him?

S What are we to make of the **Star**?

There has been a great deal of speculation about the Star which the Magi followed:

- Was it a conjunction of planets?
- Was it as supernova?
- Was it a comet?

Many hours have been spent working through astronomical records and charting times and dates and a number of plausible theories have been put forward. God could have used any natural phenomenon he chose to grab the attention of the Magi, or it could have been something entirely supernatural. Interesting ... but not at all important!

We've noted already that scripture condemns the idea of using the stars to predict the future or to determine our plans and decisions ... but God graciously spoke to these men through a means which they would recognise and could understand. This does not mean that God contradicts himself ... just that he is rather more imaginative than we tend to give him credit for. In his great mercy, God meets with us where we are, and not only where he wants us to be.

A star which moves and stops, and then moves on again defies our ability to explain ... but it was enough to lead the Magi to leave the comforts and security of home, to set out on a journey to a place they didn't know, and for as long as it would take. We can only admire their determination to respond to what God had revealed to them ... at great personal cost

... sacrificing much ... missing home ... compelled to come and worship the infant king.

CHALLENGE 2 For many Christians today there is a huge cost to following Jesus. How much are we prepared to sacrifice to follow him?

E What was their **Expectation**?

Where would wise men expect to find a king?

Finding that the Star led them west, to Judea, the Magi not unnaturally made their way to Jerusalem, to Herod's Palace. Presumably they expected to find a child, well-provided for, indulged with all the protection and luxury the Royal Household could supply.

Their answer to Herod's questioning suggests that they may have been on the road for anything up to two years. Either they had set out before Jesus was born ... or, more likely, he was already around two years old by the time they arrived ... so we ought to wipe from our minds images of the Magi struggling to find space in a stable full of shepherds and sheep, oxen and donkey, and a new-born baby in a manger.

The star led them, Matthew tells us, to the house where the child was living with Mary and Joseph ... and although this was not what they had been expecting, they were 'overjoyed' to find him, and to be in his presence.

CHALLENGE 3 Are we 'overjoyed' to be in the presence of Jesus ... or have we allowed familiarity to dull our sense of wonder?

M What was the **Meaning** of the gifts.

You've heard it all before of course, about the gifts, and what they are supposed to mean ... but it is all speculation

- Gold, for the King of Kings
- Frankincense, to sweeten the sacrifice ... and for the Great High Priest, who prays for us at the throne of God.
- Myrrh, the ointment for the healer ... and an embalming ointment for his burial.

Did the Magi have any idea that their gifts would be interpreted in this way?

Who knows?

Maybe they just brought the best they could – gifts of sufficient worth for such a noble birth. Gifts to offer as a symbol of love and devotion.

CHALLENGE 4 What offering are we willing to give? ... financial? ... time? ... skills? ... for the King of Kings.

E To what **End** did they come?

They worshipped him.

All those long months of travel ... all the risks they had taken ... all that they had left behind ... none of this mattered when they saw the child with his mother Mary:

"they bowed down and worshipped him"

Bowing down is less about what we do with our bodies, and more about what we do in our hearts. It is more about attitude than posture.

The Magi were, it seems, men of importance ... men of wealth ... men of influence ... but none of this counted for much in the presence of Jesus. They bowed down.

Read: "Meditation of the Magi" from Nick Fawcett's: "Reflective Services for Advent and Christmas" (page 128f)

N **Now**, about us!

The Magi challenge us in a number of ways:

- about why we come to worship
- about what we are prepared to sacrifice
- about our sense of joy and wonder
- about what we are willing to offer to Jesus

As they knelt before Jesus in Bethlehem ... as they humbled themselves before the King of Kings in this little town of no great importance, but in which God broke in on history and changed the world:

*"... it seemed so natural,
the most natural response we could make,
the only respond that would do!"*

OHT:

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I What was their **Intention**?

S What are we to make of the **Star**?

E What was their **Expectation**?

M What was the **Meaning** of the Gifts?

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N **Now**, about us!