

The visit of the magi Matthew 2:1-12 (Isaiah 60:1-9)

Prayer

Introduction – Happy New Year – may all the troubles of the past be well and truly behind us... but they are not are they. We are beset by brutal regimes lead by greedy expansionist leaders puffing up their feathers – we are alarmed and rightly so at the despoilation of God’s glorious creation. We have loved and lost, our bodies are creaking, our family’s fragment and our computers play up and drive us IT illiterates to distraction (apologies here for any mistakes – anyone here able to help with said IT I’d be grateful for your advice)..... But let us keep our eyes on God and hear the word that addresses the frail who listen and walk forwards in trust.

If we look carefully at this text that we faithfully read each epiphany, we see rather a lot of anomalies. Funny isn’t it that we still sing ‘we *three kings*’; we still go to nativity plays which have our key characters in crowns... but that isn’t what the text says. No, these characters are not called kings, but ‘wise’ ‘men’ by Matthew. Actually, that too is short hand for those who were probably astrologers – pagans in the eyes of Israel. And there could have been any number – so why three and in those further eastern traditions, it could easily have been represented by women too.

Let’s face it – they weren’t wise, were they? I mean these magi have been moved to travel a long way by what, a vision? Dream? Hearing of Jewish prophecy? That we don’t know either. To find a child who is to become ‘king of the Jews’. And they ask the Roman oppressor king Herod where to find him?! Not wise, no leader likes to find there are usurpers in the wings. And Herod was notoriously brutal: “Augustus, the Roman Emperor, had said, bitterly, that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.

‘We have come to pay him homage’ they naively say. Unsurprisingly the canny, and fearful, Herod wants to know where this regal infant is. He asks of those who would know the prophecy, the chief priests and the scribes, where this might be and they respond, it is Bethlehem. And Herod asks the travellers to come back and let him know so he too can ‘go and pay homage’. Ooh yeah – Ok then!

I wonder why if they have been drawn by a vision or dream before, that they didn’t get specific directions too and not have to take such a daft risk in asking Herod in the first place.

And I wonder why apparently ‘**all Jerusalem**’ is lumped together as supporting Herod . A lot for sure, he was a cracking good administrator and builder for instance – also there’d be those who were sycophants of the leader. But I think there may have been one or two amongst them who did not help him, one or two Alexiei Navalny’s working hard against the tyrant of their nation. We too need to be a bit more discerning today, don’t we, and not believe all the sweeping statements mostly from the media about particular people! Life is way more nuanced than is often portrayed. (story of black and white thinking being challenged here – the sad polarization of politics or theology for example – I don’t know about you but if I were to be judged like that, I would be a mass of contradictions in the eyes of some)

So why did a good observant Jew, Matthew, write of these astrologers or pagans, to the Jews. These travellers who were full of superstition in the eyes of Israel? Life *is* more nuanced. We chose what to say to different audiences. The writers of the Gospels were choosing their material to make a point. They could not write it all, as John said at the end of *his* account: ‘now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah...’ Matthew was writing his account for his own people, the Jewish people. He would have known that this story would seem strange to write of these superstitious chaps – but it also is entirely in keeping with the purposes of God. As Paul put it in his first letter to the Corinthian Christians:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

And this is the pattern of Jesus’ ministry: ‘I have not come to call the righteous but sinners’ (9:10-13) not those who are fine but those who know they are not fine. He commends the Canaanite woman for her faith – again a foreigner who cries out for help, (15:21-28). He said to his disciples: ‘Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.’ (20:27) and in prayer he said: ‘I thank you Father, of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants.’ This is all in Matthew. He is saying to his own people – many of whom amongst the leadership thought they had got it all sown up – that it was the least among people who would be the ones with faith the ones who knew their need, who recognised the call of the Living God. Those who are so changed by their faith in Christ

rather than the ones who have everything sorted already. What a testimony, what a witness. We who have problems – we still believe.

And a quick caveat here, I thank God for those among us called to study, to research and to understand more of God's creation to help us – and still believe. Those who are still awed and certain that there is a God and His name is Jesus, well-educated though they may be. Those who maintain a humility and openness and trust. And continue to serve with the gifts God has given to glorify Him and to love us. It is the humble who see God in all things and faithfully hang on in there. It was the humble, foreign astrologers who were drawn by the call of God to see the infant messiah and worship him. Those who know and acknowledge and act on their need of God. I fear for those who do think they have it all sown up – the Dawkins of this world, who miss the still small voice, the signs of glory in creation, the tender power of Christ in a kind neighbour. Those who dismiss the dim 'wise' men hungering for God. Those dim folk, who followed a strangely strong moving star.

Those who were then warned in a dream (!) not to return to Herod, left for their own country by another road. If there is something I will take away from studying this afresh, it is not new, but for all of us likewise I imagine, buried under loads of other stuff accumulated both from our Christian discipleship and of course all the information the world hurls at us – it is that it is trustfulness in our unknowing, trustfulness in the God we love. But also, as we face a new year of uncertainty and a need for direction – let it be that we do not look back – or at least that we do not *Go* back to our mistakes but look forward to a different direction, a different route. But still carrying the overwhelming joy that the worshipping travellers felt on meeting with the living God.

Amen