

Lessons      Isaiah 60: 1 - 11      Ephesians 3: 1 – 12      St Matthew 2: 1 – 12

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

‘The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.’ O Christ, may the Light of the Sacred radiate within us, illuminating our understanding, leading us further in the inner journey, and opening us ever more fully to Your Presence. Amen.

Whether it is the *Adoration of the Magi* by Rembrandt or Rubens or the *Journey of the Magi* by Tissot, there is something seductive, if not hypnotic, about the myth of the magi. A band of scholars, magicians, astrologers, astronomers, even kings, the wise men, perhaps three in number, embark on a journey, a long journey, in search of what? Salvation; healing for the human soul? It is a great privilege, no doubt, for a woman to carry a child in the womb and a blessing for others to place a hand on the unborn child, to feel its presence and life. Perhaps it was this touch that motivated the magi to leave home and country and travel hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. Is there a greater more important, more personal motive, than to touch the Divine and to be touched by Transcendence? The magi represent

more than themselves, more than ancient astrologers: they are the face of everyone who seeks meaning and purpose in life.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. In the Spanish speaking world, Epiphany is known as *Día de los Reyes* (Three Kings' Day). In Mexico, crowds gather to taste the *Rosca de Reyes* – the Kings' bread. In other countries, a Jesus figurine is hidden in the bread. The name Bethlehem means 'House of Bread'. In some European countries, children leave their shoes out the night before to be filled with gifts, while others leave straw for the three Kings' horses. In Bulgaria, Eastern Orthodox priests throw a cross in the sea and men dive in - competing to get to it first.

Epiphany (6 January) marks the day on which the Church remembers the journey of the wise men. Jewish scholars may caution us about potential anti-Jewish sentiment in the faith narrative. You may remember that I suggested that, in the Gospel of Matthew, written as it was around 80CE, some parables may not have come from the mouth of Jesus but represent the polemic between the Jesus Movement and the post-Temple Judaic tradition. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet, for example, in all its brutality does not readily

read like a parable of Jesus, a nature mystic from Nazareth.

Similarly, to a Jewish ear, the faith narrative of the magi may also appear anti-Jewish. In every nativity play, after the Christ-Child is born, the shepherds arrive having heard the message from the angels. Some time afterwards, the wise men make their debut.

Traditionally understood, the shepherds represent the Jewish people while the magi represent the homage paid by the Gentiles. In Christ, Jew and Gentile meet. However, if we restrict ourselves to the Gospel of Matthew, there are no shepherds. According to Matthew chapter 2, the only people to see the star, the only people to pay homage to Jesus, are the Gentiles.

Another detail challenged by Jewish scholars is the fact that, though Herod was troubled by the birth of a new king; all Jerusalem was too. The scholarly argument is that, given how much of a despot Herod was, the prospect of a new king would be a source of true rejoicing for the Jewish people. Matthew wants us to believe that, on the whole, the Jews rejected Jesus; but however valid they may be, we cannot let the criticisms blind us to the depth and beauty of Matthew's myth.

What do we make of the star, the star which stopped over Bethlehem? Some speculate that it was a super nova, the likes of which happened in 5 or 4 BC. Others say that it was the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in 7BC or the alignment of Venus and Saturn in 3BC. Both of these would have caused an unusual brightness. One scholar mischievously asks, 'Why would they have needed a star to guide them to Jerusalem or from Jerusalem to Bethlehem – these roads were well-travelled?' In the ancient world, stars, like the sun and moon, were believed to be living beings, living creatures, and heavenly bodies endowed with mind. Philo said, 'The stars are souls divine.'

In the fifth century text, the *Arabic Gospel of the Saviour*, an angel appeared to the Magi in the form of a star and led them on their journey. Angels were often depicted as bright light. In the ancient world births and deaths of great men were often augured by the appearance of a star, such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. According to Josephus, a star shaped like a sword stopped over Jerusalem as a sign of the coming Jewish revolt against Roman authority. If Jesus was to be king of the Jews, one wiser than Solomon, we would expect of His birth signs in the heavens,

emissaries, sages and seers visiting and a power struggle with other kings.

Within Jewish midrash, there is a story told of a bright, shining light in the home of Moses at the time of his birth. In that moment of epiphany, Moses' sister Miriam (or Mary) recognised his importance. Like the people of Israel who were led by pillars of cloud and fire, so the Magi are led by a star to 'the promised land'. The psalmist wrote, 'Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path.' In Scripture, light signifies the presence and guidance of God.

The Syriac Orthodox Church, like the Coptic Church, claims to trace its origin right back to the very beginning of the Early Church.

According to the Syriac Church, there were twelve magi. In a second century text called the *Revelation of the Magi*, they are described as an Order of Mystics; they are defined as 'those who pray in silence.'

They came from the mythical land of Shir, the extreme eastern edge of the known world. In this text, the star is Jesus Christ Himself, who leads them to the cave in Bethlehem. Once there, the star transforms into a luminous infant. After their visit, the Magi return to Shir and

tell the people that they too can experience the Presence of Christ, if they receive the food which the Christ offers.

There is a strong parallel between this second century text and the Fourth Gospel: again and again, in the Revelation of the Magi, Jesus, the star, is described as the Light of the World. More than that, they have a concept of Jesus as Logos, the Word or Wisdom of God. In chapter 13 of the *Revelation*, Christ says, 'I am everywhere. I am a ray of light whose light has shone in this world from the majesty of the Father.' In this text, Christ is said to have spoken everywhere, not just within the Jewish or Christian tradition. The early Syriac Christians had exposure to Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism, more so than perhaps any part of the Roman Empire. In their text, Christ has spoken everywhere. In chapter 24, there is a wonderful scene of the Christ-child laughing and having fun.

There are layers upon layers of meaning in these 12 verses of St Matthew's Gospel. In this rich mythology, there is a challenge to Herod and the worship of this world. There are strands from the Old Testament and the wider culture of the ancient world. There may be things which are fantastic and unbelievable in these myths, but we

need to dig down to the truth within. For me, it is a wonderful discovery to learn that the Magi may have their origin in an Order of Mystics, people who pray in silence and who hear the voice of Christ in the many rich religious traditions of the world. Christ is the Light of the World; 'I am everywhere'. For me, there is an intuitive logic that Christ, the Logos, is present in all people and cultures. When we go more deeply than rational doctrine, we encounter the Presence of the Sacred.

As I indicated on Christmas Day, those who come from the east are, in Greek, people of the rising. In this peculiar phrase is there a hint of the Resurrection? Are those who travel to the cradle of the Christ-Child those who live the risen life, who make the journey inward, the journey within through all its twists and turns to find Jesus? The fourth century monk and hermit, Macarius of Egypt, known as 'The Lamp of the Desert', tells us:

The heart is itself but a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and there are also lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. There are also rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there too is God, the angels, the life and the Kingdom, the light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasures of grace – all things are there.

The journey of the magi, their search in darkness for Mystery, is the ideal way to introduce a spiritual adventure. It means that in the story that follows there are depths within depths and what's needed for every paragraph is imagination.

Amen.