

St. German's Cathedral 10.30am 3rd January 2021

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

'Wise men from the East came. ... Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.' Matt 2: 1, 11.



May my words and your hearing be in the hands of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Today, as we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany - Christmastide gets another shot in the arm with the arrival on the scene of the Magi (the world of course finished with Christmas on the 26th December and have its new focus on Easter eggs). Anyway the Magi are Matthew's particular contribution to the birth narratives.

Who are these people and what are they doing in Matthew's gospel?

Well let's start with the word – Magi – Greek *μαγοι*. What are they?

Well the word which is translated in our gospel as 'wise men', perhaps were at best associated with the court of Persia – perhaps magicians - who tried to determine future events by reading the stars in the heavens (actually it doesn't actually say they were male). It was probably about as effective as reading tea leaves in a cup or looking at a horoscope from one of today's Newspapers. The Old Testament is full of dire warnings about such characters and such practices [e.g. Deut 18: 9-14, Isaiah 47: 10-13 – the latter has particular reference to star gazers]. Indeed one Jewish Rabbi writing not long before the birth of Jesus says *"He who learns from a magi is worthy of death."* and this really represents the degree of anathema associated with such a profession.

Incidentally there is no mention of three magi either - only three gifts, but over time traditions have been developed, first of all the Empress Helena (mother of Constantine) making her own contribution to the mythology by being directed in a vision to the burial site of the three kings, which are then exhumed and today are in a reliquary behind the high altar at Cologne Cathedral, Germany!

By the time of the Venerable Bede in the 8th century – that English Historian, he is able to give us their names Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar, which have now become incorporated into the mythology surrounding the children's traditional nativity play and verses of the old favourite hymn, composed in the 19th century by John Hopkins – '*We three king's*' (which we shall sing later) are often with verses preceded by the 'traditional' name of these three kings.

So why have we got these characters who are an Old Testament taboo right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel - the gospel writer who you may recall, was the most Jewish of them all, often portraying Jesus as the new Moses? And the Gospel of Matthew seen as paralleling the first five books of the Bible (different theologians suggest they have been paralleled in different ways, but here is one suggestion:

- Genesis being paralleled by Matthew's Genealogy
- Exodus – the flight into Egypt and return//wilderness 40 years
- Leviticus – Holiness of Israel//Contrast of followers of Jesus and scribes and Pharisees.
- Numbers – 12 Tribes of Israel//The calling of the 12 disciples
- Deuteronomy – the sermon on the Mount//Sinai

We have somehow subsumed the Magi into our Christmas nativity plays associated with the incarnation and find none of the horror or discord that the story must have had for those Jewish Christians hearing the gospel of Matthew for the first time. Here presented in all its starkness are astrologers from a foreign land mingling with God's Messiah – the Christ.

[Matthew has in fact already presented us with a similar scandal earlier in the gospel, but again we are so used to it we take it for granted, namely in the genealogy. Here, by tradition, only the male line would feature, but here there are inserted four women, and not just any women, but four people with less than ideal pedigrees. Tamar who acted as a prostitute (Gen 38: 24 in v3) Rahab (v5) who was a prostitute from Jericho and Ruth (v5) a foreigner. Although Bathsheba is not mentioned by name, she is referred to in a much more scandalous way as the 'wife of Uriah' and mother of Solomon - not as the wife of King David! (v6).]

So what is being said by Matthew?

Matthew is trying to make clear to us that the Gospel is not just to be associated with a small nation in a little corner of the known world, but is universal, opening wide the doors to all-comers.

Not only are men included, but women, no matter what their background. Again not only are Israelites included, but the entire world beyond their borders. Again not only are those who fall within a particular band of what is acceptable and orthodox included, but wider, ever wider is the invitation. There is no sense here of condoning the particular enterprises of the Magi, but rather the grace of God stretches out with open arms to all.

You might say that all this gives us a foretaste of the ministry of this child who would in adulthood embrace dodgy tax-collectors (Matt 9: 9), despised Roman soldiers (Matt. 8: 10, Matt 27: 54) and ostracised, lepers (Matt 8: 3). Perhaps too, with the tearing of the curtain of the Temple as Jesus dies on the cross (Matt 27: 51) the last vestige of division between humanity and God is disposed of.

Today's gospel is truly an epiphany - the word of course means 'manifestation'. It shows that as a result of the incarnation of the Son of God into the world that the doors of the church are thrown open to embrace all.

So who are the people today, knocking on the doors of the church that make us upset, because they are not what we consider appropriate to the Christian faith – who are as shocking for us as the Magi were to the Jews?!

[If I might diverge for a moment, I recall once seeing a poster outside a south London church (S. Leonard's, Streatham), which had someone outside the church saying: '*The church is full of hypocrites*', with a supplementary sentence that had God saying '*But there is room for one more!*'.]

This I think gives a flavour of what we are about. We in the church are in many ways indistinguishable from those outside the church - we are after all sinners, but by the grace of God have become 'forgiven sinners'. We therefore find our place in the church not because of any goodness, but rather because we have been fortunate enough to recognise our need of God, or at least in some way God has revealed himself to me. Like the Magi we have followed a star that has led us to the Christ of Bethlehem. We need to ask ourselves, how we can help people in their own journeys to follow such a star that leads us to Christ.

How welcoming do you think we are to new people? It's of course o.k. if people decide that Christianity is not for them, but to have people not coming because they may not feel welcomed is a tragedy. It is a challenge to all of us, because we all tend to hold back and be reserved, rather than pushing ourselves forward – it is so much easier to converse with those we know.

The wise men visiting Jesus not only found what they were looking for, but they wanted to respond. They wanted to open up their *treasure-chests*, as the reading says, and then they offered their gifts.

The church needs to be a place where:
Christ can be found; where gifts can be offered, received and exchanged. To what extent is our Cathedral of S. German here like the stable in Bethlehem a place for seeing Jesus, a place for seeing family life (no matter how varied that family life might be) and a place where we want to marvel and give thanks for the gifts of God, for God's people in what ever shape and sizes they/we come in. A place where we want to respond to God's love by opening our treasure chests.

The carol '*In the bleak mid-winter*' ends:

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 my heart.

Giving our heart opens our treasure chests so that we can truly serve the Christ child in our neighbour be they next door or at the other end of the world



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Note

The **Shrine of the Three Kings** *Dreikönigsschrein* is a reliquary said to contain the bones of the biblical Magi, also known as the Three Kings or the Three Wise Men. The shrine is a large gilded and decorated triple sarcophagus placed above and behind the high altar of Cologne Cathedral. It is considered the high point of Mosan art and the largest reliquary in the western world.

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.

In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

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 my heart.**

Matt 7: 28-29

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Matt 11.1

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

Matt 13.53

When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Matt 19.1

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

Matt 26.1

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,

Formulaic ending of five discourses of teaching of Jesus mirroring 5 books of Pentateuch