

Sermon Stowe Parish Church Mattins 1.1.17

The Wise Men Visit Jesus

I've always found this story one of the most intriguing in the bible. Who were these men? Where did they come from? They appear on the world stage, as it were, become a part of history, then disappear without trace. Today I'd like to say a few words about them and who they were, then look at the different responses we see to Jesus' birth in this whole passage and in Luke's account of the Nativity. Then consider what we can learn for ourselves from these events.

First of all, who were they? They're called Magi in the bible – a difficult word to translate. They were serious men, seekers after truth, professional priests, philosophers, scientists, astrologers. There were quite a lot of them, a sort of priestly, educated class, permanent advisors to the Kings of Persia. The meaning later became rather debased - it was used of sorcerers, and gave us the English word magic and magician. In those days almost everyone believed in astrology, and any unusual star in the sky would have caught their attention and interest. Their number is not given in the bible, and the tradition that there were three is simply a deduction from the number of gifts they gave. As for the star, there are several possible astronomical events which they might have seen around that time, but there's no reason why it shouldn't have been a one-off phenomenon, specially arranged by God. After all, the birth of his only son was a one-off event.

Now to look at the reactions to the news of the birth from the different groups. First the shepherds, who appear in Luke's narrative. As you'd expect, they reacted with awe and wonder – hardly surprising, considering that they had the encouragement of the heavenly chorus! (with angels!). But the story is so familiar: it's one of the first we learn as children, with nativity plays and the starring roles we may - or may not – have played in them, starting from our earliest years – and it all makes a fetching tableau on the stage... But think for a moment. If you'd been arranging a welcome reception for the birth of the future King of the Jews, who would you have invited? Yes, I know nobody else was awake at that time, but wouldn't you want to rustle up some local VIPs to raise an early glass of bubbly to the baby the next morning? Maybe the mayor, certainly the vicar. But no. Simple, honest, ordinary, sinful, wage-earning, blue collar sons of the soil. They were the ones who had the unimaginable privilege of being the first to see the son of God himself. So surely this is a reminder to everyone that the good news is really for all. Not just for the privileged in society. And the important, or self-important. Now we all know this of course, but it's easy I find to pay lip service to it without thinking through how it applies to us. Is there a danger that the C of E remains resolutely middle class? I remember attending an ordination service in St Pauls some years ago and the Bishop of London gave the address. He reminded the ordinands that they would be dealing for much of their ministry with those on the fringes of society. Jesus was continually

criticised during his ministry for keeping company with the dregs of society, tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees, puffed up by their own supposed righteousness, must have thought “Why not us? Why does this self-appointed religious teacher and leader not mingle more with people like us, who know so much about the law and try far harder to keep it than these down-and-outs he consorts with!” Some of them even tried to get alongside him and they certainly questioned him, whether to learn from him, or to trip him up. One thinks of Nicodemus, a genuine seeker after the truth, and Simon the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner, but found things turning pear-shaped when the prostitute with the precious ointment turned up and anointed Jesus’ feet.

And so to the Magi, educated, influential, even powerful men. But were they Jews? Certainly not – they had travelled many miles to be there. So this is a reminder to us that the good news is for all nations. These are powerful foreigners, but even rulers of all other nations will bow to Jesus. St Paul stresses the universality of the gospel again and again in his letters: to the Ephesians, for instance, He writes about his **insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.** And then later: **To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.** This visit of the Magi stands out as a very unusual episode in Matthew’s account of the nativity, and many questions are left unanswered. But that hardly matters – the points he wants to make are clear: the gospel is now for all nations, not just the Jews, and we know how hard this was to accept for many Jews as we read through the events of the Acts of the Apostles. But also, they were, if not kings, then members of the Persian court, some maybe of royal blood. So the gospel is also for those at the top of the social tree, as well as those at the bottom. Herod certainly took them seriously, in a way he would never have treated the shepherds. I imagine he had advisors very like them in his own court.

And finally Herod. You might think that, as a Jew, he would have welcomed the Messiah, perhaps even taking him under his wing, and bringing him up in his court to toe the Herodian line - but he chose murder instead, and ushered in one of the most cruel, and heart-rending episodes in the Bible, the slaughter of the innocents. I suppose that as an insecure tyrant, any whisper about a possible usurper would attract his immediate attention. So he consulted his experts, men well versed in the OT, and they told him the answer. God always gives us another chance, doesn’t he? Herod could still have changed tack, and joined in worship of the Messiah, but he continued on his murderous path.

Sometimes in our lives there are moments of unusual clarity, when a number of things fall into place together and we see what God requires of us. The New Year is a good time for reflection: in the media we hear and read summaries of all the dangerous things happening

worldwide, we realise afresh the fragility of our world, and indeed our own place in it, and we see above all how God is sidetracked in our own society, and we ask ourselves "What can we do?" Look at the shepherds and the Magi. They simply worshipped the new-born baby with humble hearts. So we too need to be humble before our Lord when we ask him what we can do. But the first essential quality is humility – a realisation that we can do nothing worthwhile in ourselves. And once we have realised and acknowledged our own weakness, then God can do something with us. Only when Samson was at his weakest, blinded, fettered, all strength gone, was God able to use him when he cried out for strength in his despair. Only when Jesus had gone to the cross, helpless, friendless, apparently powerless, was God able to achieve in him a turning point in history, which changed forever God's relationship with his creation. St Paul wrote (2 Cor 12.9) to the Corinthians about how he prayed to God about his "weakness" (whatever it may have been) but God said to him **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.**

Here's a suggestion for a New Year Resolution: "Let us pray that our own plans, dreams and aims for this coming year are not so modest that they are achievable in our own strength." And I'll now use those words as my closing prayer. Let us pray.

Almighty Father, Lord of the New Year, as of every year, we pray that with your guidance each one of us may have plans, dreams and aims for this coming year that are not so modest that they are achievable in our own strength. AMEN