

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

Tomorrow, the 6th January, is the day when the church celebrates the feast of the Epiphany, when we celebrate the visit of the wise men or Magi to the infant Jesus and we are celebrating this event a day early today

The account of the wise men visiting Jesus is one of those events where just the very bare facts are recorded in the Bible and it is Matthew alone of the gospel writers who records the account of the visit of the wise men but the basic truths that we have recorded in Matthew's gospel seem to have been embroidered with a lot of added (and largely spurious) detail down the ages.

For example, if asked how many wise men there were, we automatically assume three – a not entirely illogical conclusion based on the three gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh presented to the baby Jesus. In a little while we shall sing the carol the first line of which is We three kings of Orient are although the one thing that they weren't was kings and which perpetuates the idea that there were three of them. This is one of those carols which when we sung it at school always seemed to have a variety of different words!). However nowhere in Matthew's account are we actually told how many Magi came seeking Jesus.

Our view of the Magi has been further corrupted by the Christmas card images of the three 'wise men' sat serenely on camels following yonder star across the desert. In reality, the Magi would have journeyed thousands of miles across inhospitable terrain and it is inconceivable that men of their status and carrying such valuable gifts would have travelled alone across such dangerous territory. Rather they would have travelled with a vast retinue of slaves, servants, pack animals and bodyguards, for reasons of safety and as befitted men of their status.

The embroidery of the original text gets even more elaborate for despite the complete lack of any Biblical evidence, in some quarters, the Magi have even gained names (Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, one of whom at least, Melchior has been canonised by the Roman Catholic church) although it must be emphasised that these names are a late addition and only date from the 8th century.

The reality then, is that despite all the speculation, we know very very little about who these wise men were. The NIV uses the term Magi to describe them and it is the use of this word that may give us a bit of a clue as to who they were because the term Magi (which incidentally is the same word that we get the word magic from) is derived via Greek and Latin corruptions from the ancient Persian word Magupati – which was a specific occupational term applying to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism – an ancient cultic religion of the Middle East that placed heavy emphasis

on astrology and it is clear from Matthew's account that the Magi were drawn to Jesus by the star that they had seen in the heavens.

Finally, just to add to our list of unknowns surrounding this account, whilst these events are set in an historical context (Matthew tells us that Herod was king of Israel and we know that he died in 4 BC), we don't know quite how old Jesus was when the Magi visited.

Christmas cards – which, as we have already seen are far from a trusty guide to theological truth, have the Magi worshipping the infant Jesus along with the shepherds as Jesus lay in the manger but the reality is that Jesus was quite possibly somewhat older when the Magi visited.

Matthew gives us a bit of a clue in his gospel. If we read on a couple of verses to v16, we read how Herod, realising that the Magi have outwitted him and failed to return and report the location of Jesus to him so that he could ostensibly go and worship him (although in reality his motives were far more sinister), orders the slaughter of all Hebrew boys under the age of two in the hopes of wiping out this potential threat to his position and rule. Thus we know that Jesus would have been somewhere between birth and two when the Magi visited.

But having looked at some of the many embellishments and uncertainties that surround this passage, let's discover what we can learn from what we read there and what this passage has to teach us today.

Matthew's account falls into three distinct sections – the journey of the Magi, their meeting with Herod, and their worship of Jesus.

Matthew tells us in v1 that the magi came from the east and journeyed first to Jerusalem where they seek after the one who has been born king of the Jews. Despite the Roman occupation, Jerusalem remained the religious centre of Judaism, being the home of the Temple which had been rebuilt and enlarged by king Herod.

The Magi had come to seek the one who was born to be king of the Jews having been drawn by his star that they had seen in the east and tradition has it that the Magi hailed from Parthia which was located in the northeast of modern day Iran and the south west of Turkmenistan (although verse 2 is ambiguous for if they were in Parthia in modern day Iran, they would surely have seen the star in the western sky rather than the east although this verse could be interpreted that they had seen the star while THEY were in the east)

This star was clearly something quite remarkable. Many astronomers have tried to come up with possible conjunctions of planets that could correspond to the appearance of such a remarkable star with the favoured explanation being a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars which occurred in 6 BC or a conjunction of Jupiter Saturn and Venus which occurred in 7 BC but although broadly consistent with the time of Herod's death, we cannot be certain and surely the creator of the

universe is more than capable of creating a star to herald the birth on earth of his own son.

What is even less clear is how the Magi came to realise the significance of the star, how they knew that the star signified the birth of the one born to be king of the Jews. There is just one comparatively obscure reference in the Old Testament to a star in connection with the coming Messiah and it is this verse that is usually understood as the basis for the Magi's journey. The verse is found in Numbers 24:17 where Balaam proclaims "A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel"

It is this reference that has caused some to think that the wise men were perhaps exiles from Jerusalem who had never returned from Babylon when the exile came to an end. Although seemingly plausible, it is considered unlikely given that they seek the one who was to be born king of the Jews, a title that a Jew would not use of the coming Messiah – rather they would have referred to the Messiah or the king of Israel.

Perhaps more likely is that the Magi may have had access to ancient Jewish documents brought to Babylon at the time of the exile when Jerusalem was ransacked and that having seen the star, they studied these and other documents in order to discover the significance of the star.

Regardless though of how they came to know of the star's significance, the sight of it was clearly SO remarkable that they had been prepared to set out, not really knowing quite where they were heading for, or what they would find when they got wherever it was that the star was leading them, to follow the star.

Here is faith and confidence dare I say it, almost on a par with that of Abraham who obeyed God's call and left his homeland for the Promised Land. Although clearly not as dramatic for they may had a pretty good idea that their journey would end in Palestine for we know from v2 that they were seeking the one who was born to be king of the Jews, never the less, these Magi were prepared to set out to follow the star and to travel a thousand or more miles across dangerous and inhospitable terrain, inhabited by hungry and ferocious wild animals including lions as well as bandits or as the local press in Pakistan when I was out there liked to refer to them – dacoits.

The star leads them initially to Jerusalem and they start asking around trying to find the one who has been born king of the Jews.

News of this gets back to Herod who is deeply perturbed for he was not a Jew himself, was hated by many Jews and was deemed by many to be a usurper of the throne despite his rebuilding of the Temple. Herod was deeply insecure and so paranoid about the intentions of those around him that he had even seen to it that several members of his close family were killed off.

In order to get to the bottom of the wise men's request, we read in vv 3 & 4 that Herod gathers together the chief priests and teachers of the law (that is the religious leaders of the time) and asks them where the Christ is to be born to which they reply in Bethlehem in Judea in fulfilment of Micah's prophecy recorded in Micah chapter 5 & v2 and just 5 miles or so down the road from Jerusalem.

This merely fuels Herod's paranoia for he senses a potential threat to his authority on his doorstep and so he hatches a dastardly plan. He calls the Magi secretly to him, sends them to Bethlehem and tells them to return to him once they have found the child so that he too may go and worship (although his intentions were, of course, far more sinister).

And so, having met with Herod and with this new information about where they would find the Christ child, the Magi continue south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem where they find the Christ child with his mother Mary and they come before him and worship him, presenting him with that curious selection of gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold was perhaps the least curious and perhaps we would all hope for a gift of gold for any of our children – but for a poor family such as Mary and Joseph, it would have been a gift of great practical value especially so for their impending flight into Egypt yet gold was traditionally a gift for a king so in presenting Jesus with gold, the Magi recognised Jesus' kingship.

Although incense is quite common today, in first century Palestine, frankincense or incense, was an expensive rarity which was burnt as part of the temple worship, as an offering to God – and a curious and most unlikely gift for a young child yet in offering incense, the Magi acknowledged Jesus' deity.

Finally, there was the myrrh. Myrrh is a reddish brown resinous material that is the dried sap of a small tree native to Somalia and the eastern part of Ethiopia which was used as an embalming ointment right up to the 15th century. As well as its use as an embalming ointment, myrrh has certain analgesic and intoxicant properties and if we think forward to the crucifixion, Jesus was offered wine vinegar mixed with myrrh as he hung dying on the cross to try and dull the pain of crucifixion.

Myrrh is still used today in traditional medicine and was at one stage being developed for use as an organic slug deterrent by a company in Swansea! Here though was a gift for someone who was going to die – something we will all face one day but a curious gift to present to a newborn child.

All of these gifts were objects of great monetary value, and although we automatically tend to think of the gold as being the most expensive and valuable in purely financial terms, it was the myrrh that was probably the most valuable with high quality myrrh being worth more than its weight in gold.

Having found and worshipped Jesus, and offered him these gifts, in v12 we read that the Magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they depart for their homelands by another route before Mary and Joseph, having been warned of Herod's evil intentions in another dream, flee to Egypt.

So what are we to learn from these verses that we can apply to our lives today? For me, there are two things that jump out of this passage— firstly, the lengths that the Magi were prepared to go to in order to seek and worship Jesus and secondly, having found him, the costly nature of their worship.

The Magi travelled probably a couple of thousand miles across difficult and dangerous terrain, drawn by a star, to seek and worship Jesus.

The evidence that we have – whilst limited and not conclusive, indicates that the Magi were Gentiles and yet were drawn to seek and worship Jesus. And it is this that provides us with the first example of a theme that is to run through the gospels of outsiders, Gentiles, who sought Jesus whilst the vast majority of those Jesus came to rescue (albeit with a few honourable exceptions) ended up rejecting him and ultimately crying crucify on that first Good Friday.

The challenge for us is how much are we like those wise men? Thankfully we don't have to cross wild deserts to seek and worship Jesus but how committed are we in our determination to seek and worship Jesus?

Church attendance across the Chester Diocese has fallen by around 30% in the past 10 years so there is a real challenge for us all here, even if we are in church diligently every Sunday.

Undoubtedly there are far more competing attractions for our time than even 20 or 30 years ago and it takes real effort sometimes to commit to regular attendance at church and there may be many who have family who live a considerable distance away – indeed I'm in that situation as my parents live a 3 to 4 hour drive away but certainly at Hartford, if everyone on the electoral roll came at least once every Sunday let alone twice, we would be bulging at the seams every week and we would be needing to think again about extending the building.

It isn't that we get points for every time we come to church which somehow get us some sort of heavenly reward rather meeting together to worship the Lord encourages one another and a growing and vibrant church sends out an incredibly powerful message to the world around us. You don't have to listen long to the media to hear predictions that the church is irrelevant and will die out within a generation or two. It is down to each of us gathered here this morning to help prove those predictions wrong.

As we come to the start of this New Year, I'm not going to embarrass you by asking if any of you have made any New Year's resolutions but I hope that if you have, amongst them will be a renewed commitment to reading

the Bible and a renewed commitment to seeking and worshipping not just the Christ child of the Christmas card but the crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Lord Jesus who promises that he will come again.

Our second point of application following on from the physical commitment of the Magi in seeking out Jesus is their commitment in worship. Having sought Jesus and found him, they offered worship that was worthy of a king and of God. They weren't content just to seek him out, but having found him, they offered costly gifts, things that were valuable and precious to them. Now, I'm not suggesting for one moment that we can only worship God by making expensive offerings – we can't buy our way into heaven just as we can't earn our way there by turning up to church every Sunday but true worship is costly and sacrificial. Indeed we've just been thinking about the sacrifice of time that is a necessary part of worship and I hope that another of your New Year's resolutions will be to renew your commitment to worship of the Creator and redeemer God.

Worship is not about being seen to be pious, about the number of times we attend church on a Sunday but rather it says much about our attitude to Jesus and all that he has done for us.

Jesus gave up everything for us – his position in heaven seated at the right hand of the Father, and was prepared to sacrifice everything for us – even his own life but what do we offer in return?

Are our lives and our worship fit for a king let alone the creator and redeemer of the universe. It is very easy, especially for those who have been Christians for a long time to allow familiarity to breed if not contempt, a certain cosiness.

I'm sure that we are all guilty at times of the Christopher Robin approach to prayer – dear God, same as last night, Amen. I wouldn't speak to my wife like that on the phone if I was away somewhere with work so is it appropriate that we should talk to God in that way?

The final verse of one of my favourite Christmas carols asks the question "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"

As we journey into this New Year, it is my prayer that we would all renew our commitment to seeking and worshipping Jesus and that our worship should be sacrificial, truly fitting for the one who is the Lord of heaven and earth and that we would offer that most precious gift of all – our hearts to the one who gave up everything for us.

Amen.

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