

EPIPHANY 05-01-20 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2.1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We are so used to seeing Nativity scenes at Christmas time, we don't really think about them: there's usually a stable, various animals, shepherds, Mary and Joseph and the baby in a manger, and three Kings, often with a camel or two. They have become so much part of the tradition that we don't question that this scene represents two different stories that have been pushed together: the story of the shepherds visiting Jesus, and the story of the Magi. Luke tells us about the shepherds, and Matthew tells us the story we heard today, about the Magi.

Tradition has it that there were three wise men or kings, mostly because they gave three gifts to Jesus: but Matthew doesn't say how many there were. And they weren't kings: they were astrologers, and perhaps emissaries from a king. We don't know where they came from: it could have been Persia or Babylon or Arabia. They took astrology very seriously in those days, unlike today when most of us, if we read our horoscope in the newspaper at all, would only do it for a giggle.

The Magi were convinced that the stars had shown them that a new king had been born to the Jewish people, so they came to bring presents appropriate to a king as a sign of good will. They did the logical thing and went to the capital city, Jerusalem, and asked to see the new king.

The current king was Herod the Great, the builder of the great Temple in Jerusalem. He was, understandably, a bit disturbed that there might be a new king around the place, because he rather liked being king.

So he checked with the religious leaders and found out that the prophecies said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem- where King David was born. The Jewish people had been looking forward to the coming of the Messiah for a very long time. They wanted a king who would be like the legendary David, who would restore Israel to its former glory.

Herod, who was in power because the Romans allowed him to be, was threatened by all this: he wasn't ready to give up his throne.

So he asked the Magi to find the new king and come back to let him know, so that he could pay homage to him as well. Of course he had no intention of paying homage to anyone: he had already shown himself to be a ruthless killer who would not hesitate to bump off any opposition.

The Magi set off for Bethlehem and miraculously found the infant Jesus, paid him homage, presented their gifts and left. They were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they went home another way.

This seemingly simple story has so much symbolism contained within it, and so many parallels with Hebrew history that Matthew wants us to see, that it is worth looking into it more closely.

Matthew wants us to see the contrast between the king chosen by God and the king chosen by the Romans. He is showing us that there is conflict there right from the beginning of Jesus' life, just as there will be conflict that will result in the end of his life. The Magi ask to see the king of the Jews, and that is how Jesus is named on the sign hung on his cross. During his Passion Jesus is dressed as a king and mocked. The mystery of the cross is there from the beginning. As well as looking forward, the story looks back. Specifically, it looks back to the time of Moses, who was also born during the reign of a wicked king- Pharaoh of Egypt.

Pharaoh wanted all the Jewish little boys killed; Herod killed all the little boys in Bethlehem in his anger when the Magi didn't come back. Moses had to hide until those who wanted him dead had died themselves: Jesus and his family hid in Egypt until Herod the Great was dead. Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt to the promised land: Jesus came out of Egypt back to Israel. The divine sonship of Jesus is tied to the experiences of the people of Israel.

Matthew wants to stress to his readers that Jesus did not come out of nowhere. He is rooted in the history of Israel. Matthew knows the prophecies, like the one in Isaiah 60 that we heard this morning, and he is at pains to tell us- *this* is the one that was foretold, this Jesus is the promised Messiah. He is the new Moses, but greater still. And ironically, he is recognised and worshipped by Gentiles- the Magi- but greeted with suspicion and threat by his own people, at least by those in power.

The Magi were the first non-Jews to worship Jesus. They pre-figure the acceptance of Gentiles into the early Christian community. They demonstrate that the Gospel is universal, that this Messiah is not only for the Jews but for all people. This quick look into today's gospel reading shows us that there is depth and richness to be discovered in what seems like a simple and straightforward story. The Bible is like that, if we read it as it needs to be read, which is not superficially or with the kind of literalism that denies and dishonours the intentions of its writers.

The Magi came to honour a new king. Did they recognise what sort of a king he would be? Did they wonder why he wasn't living in a palace in the capital city? Matthew doesn't tell us what they thought, or what they did when they got home. What is important to him is that they came and gave honour to Jesus.

The Son of God didn't need gold, frankincense or myrrh, but they were symbols of honour and what is important is that they were given.

Unlike the Magi, we know a lot about Jesus: we have the gospels, the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible and more than two thousand years of Christian thought, history and tradition. We come to worship with and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to pray.

As we worship and celebrate together today, let us give thanks for all that we have been given, and bring the gifts of ourselves to lay before our Lord.

The Lord be with you.