

## Epiphany Sermon Matthew 2: 1 – 12 Year B

I heard a story once about a preacher who told his congregation that he knew a man who used to be a Buddhist. Apparently he lived on an ashram and would spend many hours meditating, emptying his mind. However, what began to happen was that an image of Jesus would pop into his mind when he began to meditate, he couldn't shake it, no matter what techniques he tried, so he eventually gave in and became a Christian.

After the service a woman came up and began to berate the preacher for telling a story that could pip people's interest in meditation and Buddhism because as Christians we don't hold with that sort of thing. And it got me thinking, what does this woman do on Epiphany, stay away from church, sit in the pew having kittens or just let it wash over her year after year?

Because this is a strange story. 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?" Wise men who study portents in stars: let's call them astronomers, they can't be astrologers because Christians don't hold with that sort of thing, see an unusual star appear and being scholars, they know their stories, so they begin a journey, a long, hazardous journey to find a king. I'd love to know what they told their wives. Doesn't this just seem a little strange to you. Using a star as the catalyst for uprooting your life, heading into all that uncertainty and potential danger. It doesn't seem very wise, does it? Just a bit mad and unusual.

But these men are determined, they are bold, they are hopeful. And being wise, they head to the place where you would expect to find the king of the Jews, Jerusalem, to inquire of this king. Where another layer of unusual gets added. For the child is not there, not where you would expect a king to be. He's not in the capital, he's not in the royal palace.

To top it all off, the Jewish chief priests and scribes: the learned ones of Israel seem to have been caught unawares by this event. They know from their scriptures where the Messiah was to be born: in Bethlehem, but it doesn't appear they have been reading the signs of the times. They have been reading scripture, they have been telling their hopeful stories of liberation, but they haven't been observing the world about them. They haven't made the connection between what they know and what they are seeing. It takes these strangers, these non-Jews to make them aware of the most important event in their history - the coming of the Messiah.

What the wise men do find, beside followers of the Jewish God caught unawares, is a very frightened king with a problematic claim to the throne. And because he was frightened, all Jerusalem was frightened. It is said of Herod that he had his favourite wife and two sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him. The Emperor Augustus famously remarked, "I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son". This is the sort of ruler they were dealing with, a cruel, ruthless man.

There is a complete contrast between the wise men and Herod. The wise men bold and eager to find the prophesised king of the Jews, Herod fearful and dreading the revelation, anxious to cling to power at all costs. He too wants to find the promised King, but to destroy, not worship and asks for news of the child's location to do just that.

So the wise men journey to Bethlehem and find the child king. Not in a palace as they probably expected, but an ordinary home. And kneeling in homage to a king, they offer their prophetic gifts: gold representing kingship, frankincense - symbolic of a priestly role, and myrrh, foreshadowing the future death and embalming of this child.

Then warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they leave and return to their own country by another road. As they left, did they puzzle over the ways of this foreign God who had placed the child king into to the care of the low born, the vulnerable, the ordinary?

As we stand at the start of a new year, here are some of my reflections on this story. Firstly, that there will be times when the most unlikely people play a part in God's divine plan. That those whose lifestyles and beliefs seem strange to us, those of other faiths, and those of no faith may very well be the ones to bring his message and even his gifts.

Secondly, let us not be caught unawares like the Jewish leaders, those whose should have recognised the Messiah had come. Can we allow ourselves to be open to encountering the Messiah in unlikely people and places this year? Can we be alert enough to recognise his presence even when it is unexpected and even, dare I say, unwelcome, because it may, as it did Herod's, shake our world, because it may show us that we are not the rulers of our own lives as we had thought? Can we allow ourselves to lay aside preconceived ideas of what Jesus is like, of how we will find him?

Also, the wise men left by another road. I'm sure that many of us have stories of encountering Jesus, often somewhere and somehow totally unexpected, and how that changed our course. Of not going back down the same old paths, of being led into an entirely new direction, facing it with trust and hope. This coming year, may we all seek and recognise signs of God with us, encounter Jesus afresh in joy and wonder, and be taken on paths we hadn't anticipated.

Amen.