

The Epiphany of our Lord 5 January 2014

Isaiah 60.1-16 Psalm 72.1-7,10-14 Ephesians 3.1-12 Matthew 2.1-12

The story of the magi coming to visit the child Jesus can be read as an allegory of the spiritual life. Matthew has already told us how this child came to be born, of the struggle of Joseph to accept this unexpected stranger into his home and heart. Not for Matthew stories of angels filling the night sky and sending shepherds out in the fields around Bethlehem rushing to the stable. That's a story from Luke's telling of the gospel. In that story the shepherds would have known nothing had God not sent those angels to make known to them what they could never have discovered without God. That's a story of God searching us out to get our attention in order to show us what matters above all. The shepherds are people of little account, lacking education and not particularly well regarded by the religious authorities of the time. But it is to these people that God sends those angels, the least and lowest, and makes known to them what will remain hidden from some of the most learned and upright.

The magi, or astronomers, or sages – it is not easy to translate the word and perhaps 'scientists of their day' is most helpful, come searching. They draw upon what they know of the material world, its signs and portents, and travel some distance to find what they intuit to be true: that a child has been born *king*. Matthew says they ask Herod, the Roman puppet king, 'where is the one who has been *born to be king* of the Jews'. No wonder Herod is afraid. He is only king so long as he maintains his power and the favour of the Romans and history tells us he had been doing that by building extensively to the benefit of the people and by cruel and even paranoid dealings with his family. Herod is more complex, as is so often the case in life, than Matthew's eventual portrayal of him. It's not that the good excuses the outrageous; it's just that so often both co-exist in spades in powerful figures, and we should not be naive or surprised about that.

Herod is an archetype of those who will go to any lengths to protect their illusions and who feed, rather than face, their fears. Herod meets these travellers 'in secret' and secretly plans to use them. He deceives them by saying he shares their quest while all the while he is planning, like a stalking animal, to pounce once they have found his quarry for him.

So, the path to the child and the truth of his birth for these eastern strangers is by way of the scientific method of their day. They seem unaware, until God breaks through to them, that Herod is not to be trusted. Using the knowledge they have, and drawing on the wisdom they are open to be taught as we see in their response to the warning dream, they do indeed reach their goal. Their eyes are opened, not just to the child but to the unexpected, alternative journey they must eventually make, the changed path in life ahead of them.

Do we find it odd that these astronomers follow a star? We moderns discount natural phenomena. I have a comic Christmas card with one wise man pointing to a light in the sky and saying, 'There it is; it's moving again. Another says, 'No, that's the Melbourne-Dubai flight this time of night.' Do we moderns now think lights in the sky can be explained away every time? Perhaps we've forgotten the psalmist's words and no longer imagine they need shape our view of the world.

and the firmament proclaims his handiwork;
2 One day tells it to another:
and night to night communicates knowledge.
3 There is no speech or language:
nor are their voices heard;
4 Yet their sound has gone out through all the world:
and their words to the ends of the earth. *Ps 19. APBA, 239*

They arrive, these star gazing foreigners, and they see the child with Mary his mother, and they adore him and bring the gifts they have carried so far. To this day everyone entering the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem must bend low to enter the small door that is the only way in. We parish pilgrims did so last April. It is symbolic imitation of the moment those sages arrived and bent low before the One they had sought for so long.

Matthew is almost beside himself in conveying to the reader just what this moment was for those magi. The scholars say the Greek reads literally they ‘rejoiced a great joy’ or, ‘they rejoiced with joy that is great indeed’. I don’t know if you have ever felt a moment of pure joy or ecstasy. I once rolled down a grassy slope with my younger son when he was about seven or eight; we were hugging one another and rolled over and over and could not stop laughing for the sheer joy of the moment but laughing is too shallow a word to describe what I felt. The essence of such moments is that we are quite literally lifted out of ourselves into some truer and greater existence, a moment of pure gift – just fleeting, but genuine.

So they offer the symbolic gifts – gold for a king, frankincense for the worship of One who reveals divinity to us and myrrh for the One who will transform the human experience of death. Their treasures, Matthew calls them. With the gold they confess Jesus to be king and open the treasure of faith, the human ability to believe. With the incense they open the treasure of surrender, the human ability to give ourselves as completely as possible to the one true God. And with the myrrh, sued for burial, they announce the coming passion and open the treasure of evangelising the world, the human ability to participate in and proclaim the work of Christ that redeems.

And having completed their journey, they ignore the temptation to revisit Herod and try to set him straight. Perhaps they really did have his measure, and their dream confirmed their sound suspicions. They return home by another way. The love and mercy of God is vulnerable to the destructive intent of Herod. Mary and Joseph depart for Egypt, way to the south. Which way east these foreigners travelled is not made clear. All we know is that they now went a way they had not earlier planned, and did so willingly since God’s purposes depended upon their obedience and their willingness to fade from the scene having played their part.

I said this story can be read as an allegory of the spiritual life. Its depths might take a lifetime to explore and we will never exhaust its truth. So what guiding star gains your attention? What treasure are you carrying with you, ready to share it when the moment comes? And how open are you to going by another way if God asks that of you? And are you ready for the living God to choose the way of weakness and vulnerability for God’s saving purposes to become clear to you?
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