

**Sermon by Peter Somers Heslam, St John's Hills Road (Cambridge), Epiphany Sunday, 06-01-19.**

**Gospel reading: Matthew 2.1-12**

**Text: 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him' (Mt 2.2).**

I hope you woke up this morning from a good Twelfth Night - not too disturbed, I hope, from 12 drummers drumming and a partridge in a pear tree! The festive season isn't entirely over but I guess most of us are starting to take down our Christmas cards. Yet before we consign them to the recycling bin, I wonder if you could do a quick experiment for me. Any children in your family may be willing to help you. What proportion of your cards depict the Christmas story in some way? And how many of these cards display the Wise Men, compared to the shepherds?

If your totals are anything like ours, the Wise Men will win hands down. Their popularity is not new. Over the past 2000 years, the Wise Men have been a source of endless fascination, not only to historians but to artists of all sorts. Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum provides several examples of such fascination on the part of great painters.

But for many *more* thousands of years, what fascinated the Wise Men has also fascinated the rest of us human beings: the lights, stars, planets and moons of the universe. We know this is still the case from the current media coverage of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first moon landing and of the first landing this week of a robot on the hitherto unexplored dark side of the moon.

This fascination with the heavens extends to the field of music. When I was a boy, my teenager friends were raving about the album *Dark Side of the Moon* by the rock band Pink Floyd. And amongst lovers of 20<sup>th</sup> century classical music, Gustav Holst's 'The Planets' is a highly celebrated work.

This age-long fascination with the night skies is reflected in some of the oldest parts of the bible. In Job, for instance, we find what we might call 'space poetry'. We read that the stars "sing together" and "shout for joy", and star constellations are mentioned that are familiar to us today, like Orion and the Bear (Job 9.9).<sup>i</sup>

So Epiphany Sunday reminds us of two subjects of long-standing scientific and artistic fascination: the story of the Wise Men; and the arrangements and movements of the heavenly bodies in the skies above us.

But by definition, an epiphany is a fresh 'appearance', or 'manifestation' – a moment of profound insight or revelation. We can and should expect this each time we gather together. But if it's to happen on this of all Sundays - Epiphany Sunday - we may first need to do a reality check.

For when it comes to the biblical accounts of Christ's birth and infancy, our artistic imagination can blur the boundary between legend and history. That's fine during a season of the year full of poetry, symbol, myth, music and mystery. But it sometimes means we 'read back' into the original story things that aren't actually there.

The bible does not, for example, tell us that Jesus was born in a stable; nor that it was in winter; nor that there were three Wise Men; nor that these Wise Men were kings; nor that one of them had a different skin colour to the holy family; nor that their names were Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar.

All that's known about the Wise Men is what St Matthew tells us in the dozen verses that made up this morning's gospel reading (Mt 2.1-12).

We don't even know that these men were 'wise'. The only word the bible uses to refer to them is 'Magi'. As the word implies, they were probably Magi-cians - sorcerers, or astrologers, or Zoroastrian priests with supposedly supernatural powers. In biblical times, such people were considered glorified fortune-tellers, and the use of the signs of the zodiac and horoscopes was roundly condemned in Jewish tradition.

So to Matthew's Jewish audience, the Magi would have been thought of as knowledgeable but not *wise*. While the Hebrew scriptures provide much exhortation to wisdom, none of it condones the purported wisdom of Magi. Indeed, Magi would have been regarded not so much as well-meaning but unenlightened Gentiles but Gentiles locked in idolatry and religious hocus-pocus. Their preoccupation with predicting the future through their observance of the stars, and their dabbling in various divinations, was not unlike psychics today consulting tea leaves, tarot cards, and Ouija boards. It was widely considered a dark and dangerous preoccupation that warranted God's judgement.

This is reflected in what is said about a Jewish magus (the singular for magi) in an incident recorded in the Book of Acts. In Chapter 13 we read of Barnabas and Paul arriving in Paphos, where they meet Elymas. Here's how Paul addresses him: "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10).

These are tough words! I cite them only because to receive an 'epiphany' we generally need to be prepared to let go of some cherished notions. I'm not out to pop the romantic bubble with which we and many previous generations have surrounded the Wise Men. Legend, mystery and poetry all add to the symbolic richness of this season of the year.

That richness has been fostered through delightful Christmas stories, folklore and fairy tales, such as those told by Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, the Grimm brothers, Harry Van Dyke, and Raymond Briggs. Laced through their stories are central themes of the Christmas story, such love, forgiveness, friendship and generosity. The intangible but real 'spirit of Christmas' we will have felt at least at some points over the last twelve days owes a great deal to their stories and the timeless truths they convey.

But allowing the Wise Men to be rehabilitated, at least for a moment, as their original audience would have perceived them, allows us to grasp a timeless truth St Matthew's story conveys. This is that God manifests himself in human form not to people associated with orthodox piety but to pseudo-scientists, astrologers, fortune-tellers, magicians, pagans, heathens, and heretics.

These are the people who, in such a Jewish account at Matthew's, are shown to be guided by God to himself. And it is such people who enter the home of the most holy of Jewish families. There they are, these Gentile sorcerers, in the centre of the stage in St Matthew's portrayal of the incarnation. And there they are, as a result, in the centre stage of many of our great paintings of the nativity, many of which still stand in 'holy' places, such as above the high altar in King's College Chapel in Ruben's famous 'Adoration of the Magi'! Magicians at the high altar in a Cambridge college chapel, drawing the eye of every visitor!

This is the shocking truth of the gospel. God's redemption, it turns out, is not for the righteous but the unrighteous. It's not just for Jews but for all. This is the message of Matthew's entire book but it's condensed down to just twelve verses in the story of the Wise Men.

In that story, God gets the attention of very unlikely candidates by means of something within their frame of reference - planetary alignment. He then leads them across miles of inhospitable terrain to a face to face encounter with himself, incarnate in the infant Christ. Their response is one of worship, which they express in the only way they know how – in the giving of costly gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

So what challenges does this twelve-verse ‘gospel in a nutshell’ have for us at the start of this New Year? I’d like to suggest four.

The first is to think about the people we know who seem to be the furthest from God. Let us give space in our imaginations and in our prayers for God to guide them to Christ. We know from the grace God has shown to us how gracious God is towards them. Pray that they will see and follow the ‘star’ by which God is longing to guide them to himself.

The second is especially relevant in Cambridge, a global centre of knowledge. We may in our universities have exchanged the study of astrology to astronomy as a result of the scientific revolution. But the observation and learning of the Wise Men is the means by which they are led to Christ. When they find him, their response is to worship him. This tells us something important about scholarship. It is that God is above all human knowledge, and that all the truth that humans can discover or perceive is ultimately God’s truth. Consequently, to study that truth is to think God’s thoughts after him. Even knowledge that may have come to us from a dubious source, and knowledge that may have been used for dark purposes, is subservient to Christ’s authority over all that exists, whether those things are seen, or unseen - like gravity and electricity.<sup>ii</sup>

Thirdly, we have the opportunity at the start of this year to give, like the wise men, of our very best. One of the gems of Methodism is its Covenant Service, held typically on the first Sunday of the New Year. At one point in the liturgy, worshippers say ‘I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.’ ‘All things’ must encompass our costliest things, which in our results-driven and distracted culture will include our time and attention. Do we give God time and attention from our ‘left-overs’, when nothing else is pressing? If so, as we know deep down, we are unlikely even to give him that, for there is almost always something that makes a call on our time and attention. At the start of this New Year, will we resolve to give God not our left-overs but all that we have and all that we are? Every moment of every day yielded to God from a heart of worship and adoration?

Fourth, we may be starting this New Year feeling shaky about the year just past. Perhaps we’ve floundered in our work and messed up in our relationships - even in the ones most precious to us. We’re hesitant to make any resolutions before God because we kept the ones we made last year only until end of January. Then we felt guilty about them, and then we pushed them out of our minds altogether. But the story of the Wise Men gives us hope. If they were as estranged from God as in biblical times they were thought to be, there is hope for us in our estrangement. For they were not left unchanged by their experience. Before they had found Christ, they were part of Herod’s jealous and murderous plan to bring violence and destruction. But after they had worshiped Christ they received a warning in a dream so that they ‘returned to their country by another route’ (Mt 2:12). They went home *by* a different way and *in* a different way. At the brink of this New Year, God is offering us another route, a different way, to the one we took last year, and the year before that. That way will lead us to safety. And it will lead us home.

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<sup>i</sup> Another example of ‘space poetry’ is Psalm 147.4, where we read that God ‘determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name’. In Genesis 12 the childless Abram goes out at night and hears God promise that he will have descendants as numerous as the stars he sees in the sky.

<sup>ii</sup> Cf Col 1.16.