

Three Wise Men?

Every year there is confusion at the nativity play: were these visitors from the East bearing gifts, 'kings' or 'wise men' or 'Magi'? And what on earth *are* Magi?

The story of the visitors from the East only appears in Matthew's gospel, which I find really strange given that it's to Luke's gospel that we turn for much of the nativity story at Christmas. Luke, as we know, has all the detail: the angel's appearance to Mary; her visit to cousin Elizabeth; the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, placed in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn; the visit from the shepherds following their encounter with the angels; all ending with Mary and Joseph making the six-mile journey to Jerusalem when Jesus was about a month old. Here, they presented him in the temple and offered a sacrifice for his safe delivery, much to the delight of Simeon and Anna. Thereafter, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph return home with Jesus to Nazareth where the '*child grew and became strong.*' No mention of any visit from wise men or Magi, and no flight to Egypt.

Whereas in Matthew's gospel, Mary and Joseph's hometown appears to be Bethlehem. There's no long journey, no asking for rooms in inns. We're simply told, '*When Joseph woke from his dream, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*' No manger in a stable, no shepherds on a hillside, no angelic singing. But we *do* have the visitors from the East. Visitors who *could* be regarded as the wrong people, arriving at the wrong time, bringing the wrong gifts. But let's explore this together.

Today's Gospel reading from the start of Matthew chapter 2 jumps ahead up to two years from the end of chapter 1 where Jesus is born and named. Now the baby is a 'child' and the family is living in a house in 'Bethlehem in Judea'. And some Magi from the east arrive seeking to worship the one born 'King of the Jews'. The term 'Magi' originally referred to a priestly caste in ancient Persia, who were leading figures in the religious court life, employing a variety of astrology, wisdom and magical incantations in their work. They sound interesting people indeed.

These Magi came looking for the one born 'King of the Jews'. Remember again where they were from? Persia, which was ancient Babylonia. Do you remember what happened to the Jewish people at the hands of the Babylonians in the Old Testament? Well, they'd been conquered and taken off to Persia as captives. The Jewish people hadn't forgotten this, so the Persians or Babylonians were probably second only to Romans as not-very-welcome guests. You have to ask yourself the question - wouldn't some nice Jewish rabbis have been a better choice? Men learned in the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than a bunch of heathen sorcerers? Men

who had centuries of Jewish lineage behind them, anxious to see the long-awaited Christ or Messiah? But it isn't to be. God chooses to announce Jesus' arrival through exactly the *wrong* people – Gentile Magi from Babylon – non Jewish sorcerers from a nation hated and despised by the people of Israel. Gentile Magi who would have known about the Old Testament prophecies from the Jews who remained in the East after the Exile, but Jewish they were not.

So, Gentile, well-informed but probably unwelcome. Magi who'd travelled around 1000 miles, and there probably weren't just three of them. Eastern tradition sets their number at 12, and they were likely to have been accompanied by a number of attendants and guards for the long journey. Quite a party they would have been, turning up at the palace in Jerusalem, and then at the home of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.

So, the wrong people, but why the wrong time? Well, despite every nativity play, primary school assembly and a million Christmas cards, the Wise Men or Magi certainly weren't there for Jesus' birth, standing tall behind the shepherds holding their gifts. Herod's dreadful plan to get rid of boys up to two years old, rather than just the newborns, tells us that that Jesus was a toddler by the time the wise men turned up. Just a little bit late, then, to celebrate a birth. And arriving during the time of King Herod, one of the most ruthless and unstable rulers of the time, was to have disastrous consequences for every other little boy born in Bethlehem around the time of Jesus. So, not only did the Magi arrive at the wrong time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, their timing couldn't have been worse for young families with little boys living in Bethlehem and close by.

And the gifts? There's been a popular cartoon on social media for several years now which has a picture of the stable scene and three wise women with the caption, '*After the Three Wise Men left, the Three Wiser Women arrived bringing fresh nappies, casseroles for the week and lots of wine.*' Gold, I guess, would always be handy but what were a carpenter, his wife and toddler going to do with myrrh and frankincense?

So, the wrong people, at the wrong time, bringing the wrong gifts. *Or were they?*

I think there are at least three things we can learn from these strange visitors from the East.

Firstly, we can learn from their searching and their following. Astrology, 2000 years ago, was quite different from astrology today – it was quite a sophisticated science, and these men studied the stars.

And this was a star that actually moved! And stars don't move. And so the Magi knew instinctively that this star was worth following. And follow they did. This journey would have taken them over 1000 miles, the equivalent would be from

Cambridge to Southern Italy. And this would probably have been by foot or by camel.

And so this was a journey that took a very long time. And sometimes we find ourselves searching for answers, searching for God, and that can sometimes take a very long time and a great deal of perseverance. But the promise of God is, that when we seek him with all our heart, we will find him and he will answer us.

So we can learn from the Magi by their searching and their following. The second example would have been their worship and their devotion.

The Proclaimers once sang a song about a hypothetical 1000 mile journey:

“Now I would walk 500 miles, and I would walk 500 more. To be the man who walks a thousand miles to fall down at your door?”

In our reading today we saw that when the wise men arrived and saw the child they, a bit like the Proclaimers, fell down ... but not through exhaustion. They bowed down to worship.

And then they opened up their treasures. Which means they must have packed gold, frankincense and myrrh to bring with them – gold was mined and frankincense and myrrh were grown in their home country. They had come prepared with their gifts, and they had carried those gifts all that way.

And this is very challenging – what would that kind of devotion and preparation look like in Cottenham at the turn of 2019?

And thirdly, we can learn from their openness and obedience. The Magi were warned in a dream to go back another route. Sometimes if we’re going on a journey or a walk in an unknown place, the journey back is always quicker and easier than the journey there, because we’re on more familiar territory. But the Magi were told in a dream that this was a bad idea. And so they obeyed the dream and went back another route, avoiding Herod.

I wonder how many of us have hunches, or promptings of the Holy Spirit, and what we do with them. I wonder how in tune we are to the Spirit, and whether we can recognise and hear God’s voice in the quiet. We live in a noisy world, a world that pulls us in all kinds of directions – a world where we have to be very intentional if we want to live life differently to the social norms. There’s a challenge for me there – to take time out to listen to God, listen to myself, and to invite God to speak to me and to be prepared to listen and obey, even if what he is asking is hard, or isn’t in line with what I want to do, or if it doesn’t seem to make sense. But there’s also a challenge for us all as we begin our year of discipleship together. A year where we intentionally journey together to deepen our faith in Jesus and look at what and where he is calling us as individuals and as a church.

I'm really excited about this next year as there will be lots of very different things going on. There will be short courses exploring what it means to say '*I believe ...*', how to read the Bible, what the Eucharist is all about, and discovering our gifts. There will be sermon series on God's generosity and giving, forgiveness, how we relate to God and each other, prayer, and sharing our faith. There will be opportunities to join a small group, come along to a prayer event, a quiet day maybe or visit a Christian festival, read a Christian book, or commit to praying and reading the Bible more often. There will be more about this in the coming weeks.

But as we celebrate Epiphany, let's learn from the Magi. Wise Men who weren't who everyone was expecting, were late to the birth and brought strange gifts. But who, when they saw the child, bowed down and worshipped him, were prepared for the moment and were open and obedient to God's call on their life. May we all be as wise as they.

Let's pray:

What shall be the star to guide us, Lord, and what shall be our dreams?
Speak to us as you will, so we may walk in your ways and lay the gifts of our hearts, minds and souls at your feet. Amen.