

Epiphany: Matthew 2:1-12: St John's, Keswick, 3 January 2016

Today we celebrate the festival of Epiphany. At Christmas we celebrated the birth of Christ; now at Epiphany, which means manifestation or showing forth, we recall how the light of Christ began to be shown forth in the world. In the season of Epiphany we hear how different kinds of people began to respond to the Christ, the Messiah whom God had sent. And today we've heard the story of the Adoration of the Magi, as told in the Gospel of Matthew.

Like many Biblical stories, this one suffers from over-familiarity. We feel we know it very well, but it is perhaps just the endless Christmas card images that we know, while the story which Matthew actually tells is less familiar. It's interesting that we think of three *kings*, whereas Matthew doesn't call them kings but *magi*, Persian astrologers, and he doesn't even say that there were *three* of them. The number hardly matters; more important is the difference between Matthew's story and the jovial, mulled-wine-and-roaring-fires kind of atmosphere which we unconsciously associate with stories about the baby Jesus. Matthew's story does have its moment of overwhelming joy, but for the most part it is a tense account full of surprises, stark contrasts and deception. And beneath the surface there is a threat of violence which finally erupts in the verses following today's reading, which tell of King Herod's command to slaughter the innocents - the ghastly massacre of children in Bethlehem.

So what's going on in this story? It's important to remember that Matthew is a Jew who has become a disciple of Jesus, and he is writing for fellow Jews, giving them an account of this man he believes is the Messiah, the true king of Israel, the one they were waiting for. So let's try to imagine how a first-century Jew would have heard Matthew's story.

One thing to strike such a Jewish reader would be how *strange* it is that the first people to honour this Messiah are magi, Persian astrologers, Gentiles. The King of *the Jews* has arrived, and who do you expect to be first on the scene? Presumably members of the Jewish religious or political hierarchy, but no, it's not them; it's actually these Gentiles, these magi who have come all the way from Persia. They are not part of the people of Israel; they don't keep the law of Moses; they are unclean; they are not the right kind of people at all. But these are the first to greet the infant Messiah, the saviour of the Jewish people. That's very odd.

And yet a thoughtful Jewish listener to this story, one well versed in the scriptures, may hear bells ringing, because the story of the Magi does in fact echo certain passages in the Prophets and Psalms which speak of how the Gentiles will come to honour the Messiah of Israel, and will bring gifts to him, gifts such as gold and incense. So maybe there is something deeply appropriate, after all, in the visit of these foreigners to the new-born Messiah. Maybe this is a sign of something God has always intended, that his people Israel will have their own local character, their distinct identity; and yet they will also be a blessing for everyone, a light to the nations. The purpose of Israel must burst beyond its original confines and embrace the world. And with the arrival of Jesus we see this starting to happen as the Magi come to adore him. Jesus will be the embodiment of true Israel, the devoted servant of the Lord who is also a light to the wider world, the Gentiles; and the Magi are the first representatives of that wider Gentile world being drawn to the light. What might look very strange at first glance is in fact deeply in tune with what God has always planned.

But it still remains very strange that while these Gentiles honour the Messiah - and even worship him! - the Jews of the day are either hostile or indifferent. Not just Herod, the reigning king, but all Jerusalem, the city of David, where the Messiah would have his throne, all Jerusalem is troubled at the news of his birth. Quite why, Matthew doesn't say, but here, at the beginning of his Gospel, we meet a theme which will recur again and again. While so-called godless outsiders welcome the Messiah, the people who should have been the first to do so show only hostility. Later, Jesus will comment that another Gentile, a Roman centurion, showed greater faith in him than he found anywhere else in Israel. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. So this strange reception for the Messiah would perhaps be the first thing to strike a Jewish reader. Gentiles welcome him; his own people do not.

What else might have struck a Jew hearing Matthew's story? We should remember that the Jews of Jesus' time were expecting the Messiah to be an impressive figure who would bring about a dramatic improvement in their fortunes, liberating them from the oppressive, defiling occupation of Israel by the Romans. The Messiah was to be like David, a warrior-king, and under his rule a golden age would dawn, an age of justice, peace and universal harmony.

Here, again, a Jew hearing Matthew's story would be surprised, because Matthew's Messiah, the infant Jesus, is far from powerful. In fact, he's weak and vulnerable and only just escapes Herod's plot to kill him. Even when he grows up, this Messiah does not gain the kind of political and military power that he ought to have. Instead, he will choose a path through life leading to an early and ignominious death, which Matthew will claim is the climax of his work as Messiah.

And even if, as Matthew's story claims, God then raised the crucified Jesus from the dead, even then, what impact on the wider world does the coming of this Messiah bring? News of his arrival prompted the massacre of little children in Bethlehem. The coming of Christ wasn't very good news for them. Maybe the world would have been better off without him. And throughout the rest of his life, even if he spoke remarkable words and performed extraordinary acts of healing, there was still no obvious outbreaking of that universal peace and harmony which the Messiah should bring. And 2000 years later, there still isn't. A very good question, and a very difficult question, which Christians have always had to face, especially from Jews, but also from others, and indeed also from our own hearts and minds as we reflect on the apparently unredeemed darkness of the world, is this: if Jesus is the Messiah, where is the messianic age the Messiah is supposed to bring? Where is the promised peace and joy for the whole world? If everything is so wonderful, why is everything so awful?

In Matthew's story of the infant Jesus, the Magi and Herod, and the slaughter of the innocent children, and then beyond this story in the rest of his Gospel, he presents Jesus to us as the long-awaited Messiah and also Immanuel, God with us. And that is good news and grounds for rejoicing. But we need also to recognise the strangeness, the difficulty of this revelation. The presence of God that can be seen in Jesus is also hidden and obscured. The people who should recognise him don't. He is vulnerable and powerless and he doesn't very obviously deliver what is expected, the messianic age that the prophets had promised.

What these reflections point to is that the Christian faith can often be very hard. It can be hard to understand; and it can be equally hard to live out. That hardness is a theme of T. S. Eliot's poem, 'The Journey of the Magi', in which he offers an imaginative account of the Magi on their way from the East to Bethlehem. Their journey is not a jolly trip; this is no easy pilgrimage; their way is cold, hard and uncomfortable. Often they regret setting out and wish that they'd never bothered; all the way there are voices singing in their ears, saying that this is all folly.

And yes, in a sense it is folly. There is something weak and foolish in the way God has chosen to act in the world. God does not zap the world into shape with impressive acts of divine power. Instead, God comes to us as a vulnerable child who becomes a crucified man. But hidden within that apparent weakness and foolishness is God's loving wisdom and his power to remake us and to remake the world.

This is what the Magi discovered. It was a costly discovery, demanding a long, cold, uncomfortable journey, nagged by uncertainty. But the journey also brought joy, overwhelming joy, even in the darkness of a cruel and sad world. Of course, after their moment of joy, their worship of the Christ child, the Magi had to begin the long journey home again. But their return journey, however hard, must have been different: they had seen what God had done; they had seen Emmanuel, God with us. They now had to begin to understand the implications of this for their own lives; they had to begin to reckon with new, difficult questions. Matthew tells us nothing of what happened to the Magi after their return home, but Eliot imagines them as feeling 'no longer at ease in the old dispensation'. They are no longer at ease in their old life after their encounter with Christ: he changes things and brings great joy; he also complicates things and leads us on some very hard paths.

In this new year may we, like the Magi, travel with perseverance on the journey of faith. Whatever lies ahead for us this year, whatever struggles and questions we may face, whatever hard ways we may have to travel, may we, like the Magi, know ever more deeply the overwhelming joy that God is with us in Christ.