

The Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

This is Matthew's Christmas story. Quite different from that of Luke. Not contradictory – more complementary. Matthew tells us different things. So, no Shepherds but wise men from the east; the story is told far more from Joseph's perspective than Mary's; and only Matthew tells us about Herod's plan to kill Jesus.

So let's look in a little more detail at what Matthew tells us. First note that this is not a story about three kings but wise men of an unspecified number. Wise men is the most common translation of the word that Matthew actually uses – Magi.

The word magi originally referred to a member of the priestly caste from the Medes and Persia. So it is quite likely that these men had travelled some distance – possibly for over a whole year. Herod subsequently ordered the murder of any boy baby under two years old so it seems reasonable to suppose that Jesus was well beyond being a newborn child. The keeping on Epiphany after twelve days of Christmas is a convention that does not reflect historical reality.

The wise men give a reason for their visit:

We observed his star at its rising and we have come to pay him homage.

Matthew 2:2

We have heard these words so often that we probably do not notice that they make little sense to us. We don't have our own stars and we don't follow them!

However, in the ancient world it was believed that at the birth of each significant person a new star would appear in the heavens that would shine as brightly as that person's stature deserved.

And we know from other sources that there was an unusually bright star in the sky around 6 or 7 BC that may well have been interpreted by the wise man as a sign of a significant birth. So that gives us a very possible date for Jesus' birth.

However it is clear that the star was not sufficient to take them straight to Jesus' house because when they arrive in Bethlehem they have to start asking around. They were not very discreet – 'Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?' they ask – and it would appear that Herod got wind of their search.

We take it for granted that Herod should be upset at the possibility of a rival king. But there is far more to this than Matthew tells us for we know a good deal from other sources. Herod was an unusually anxious king – and with good reason. We are all familiar with King David and his son Solomon who reigned in the greatest years of Israel's history. Jesus was greeted as the successor to David. But Herod was not a descendent of David at all. A couple of centuries before Jesus there had been the Maccabean kings who had done their best to throw off their Greek oppressors. But nor was Herod a descendent of the Maccabees. In fact Herod's mother was an Arab and his father was an Edomite – regarded by many as enemies of the Jews. Herod reigned not because of any real authority but because his father was a collaborator with the invading Romans. He knew that his own position was entirely reliant on their goodwill and when any rival came on the scene he took drastic action. So it was that he murdered his wife, her two sons, her brother, her grandfather and her mother.

As it happens there is no evidence from any other source that he ordered the murder of any children. But since the number was probably only about 20 – the total population of Bethlehem was only a thousand – and they were of no political significance, it may well be that contemporary political writers regarded this as an event of no great significance given Herod's other atrocities. The murder of twenty children is quite in character.

The contrast between the kingship of Jesus and Herod could not be greater. Herod is willing to sacrifice a whole generation of children in

small town to preserve his own reign. A later Herod was willing to execute John the Baptist on a trumped up charge in order to curry favour with his stepdaughter; he later acquiesced in the death of Jesus to preserve his relationship with the Roman occupiers. In contrast Jesus will sacrifice no life but his own – and that for all humanity.

And this is undoubtedly what the wise men recognize. The early church fathers saw a triple symbolism in the gifts: gold for a king, incense for God and myrrh for one who was to die. Modern scholars suggest that all three gifts might be for a king. These were the kind of expensive gifts that were offered to kings in Old Testament times. For example when the Queen of Sheba made her famous visit to King Solomon she brought with her gold, spice and precious stones (1 Kings 10:10). The reading we heard a few minutes ago prophesied the nations coming to Israel with gifts of gold and frankincense. We can have no doubt that it is not only the wise men who regard Jesus as a king: Matthew shares their view. He reports the advice of Herod's own advisers that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. He quotes from the prophet Micah:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel
Micah 5:2

But he makes a subtle change. Micah stresses the littleness of Bethlehem in Judah but Matthew writes that Bethlehem is 'by no means least'. This is because Bethlehem has already provided one king – David. And the words 'a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel' are taken from elsewhere, from an oath of loyalty sworn to King David.

This story is the culmination of a fine Old Testament tradition of looking outwards and beyond the nation. There were times when the Jewish people were nationalistic and inward looking. But there were many other times, represented for example by the passage from Isaiah we just heard, when they realized that their vocation was to draw all the nations to know the love of God. It is of the greatest significance that the wise men are not Jews. They are gentiles. They are us.

This making known of the good news to the gentiles was a theme that dominates Paul's letters. For example in the passage we heard today from Ephesians he writes;

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ephesians 3:5-6

And at the very end of his gospel Matthew returns to this same theme as he reports Jesus final words on earth:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Matthew 28:19-20

These words are in a sense the culmination of the Epiphany story. Matthew ends his gospel as he began it, looking outwards.

N Clews
5th January 2017