

Welcome

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Who welcomed whom? Was it the magi who welcomed Jesus? Or was it Mary and Joseph who welcomed the Magi?

Matthew tells us nothing about how Mary and Joseph received the magi but it is reasonable to suppose that they were courteous. I remember a few decades ago when the birth of a nephew or niece was a regular event, we would pay a visit after a suitable time had elapsed, bearing a gift for the new child and, more importantly, a gift for any older brother or sister.

But Mary and Joseph must have been taken back by their visitors; they had already received some shepherds from the hills in their smelly work clothes; now they were visited by some toffs in sharp suits from a foreign country no doubt smelling of the first century middle eastern equivalent of Hugo Boss or Paco Rabanne.

And they would have been even more taken back by the gifts: not just the expense – not much gold, incense or myrrh in Nazareth – but the symbolism. Gold was what you gave to a king; incense was for God – remember that John the Baptists father, Zechariah had been about to offer incense in the Temple when he learned that he was to be a father (Luke 1:6-10) - and most troubling of all, the myrrh. Myrrh was spiced oil for anointing the dead. Remember that the women who went to the tomb took with them spiced oil to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark 16:1).

Perhaps both Mary and Joseph now recalled the words of the angel when they learned of Jesus's conception. Perhaps the penny was beginning to drop. How do you get your head round the possibility that your new baby is chosen by God? How do you get your head round the idea that your new baby is God incarnate? How do you get your head round the possibility that your son is destined to die before you do?

So, I imagine that Mary and Joseph were perfectly civil to the magi – but utterly mystified as to why they were there.

But the story of the wise men is not simply about the welcome Mary and Joseph give to a few strangers. It has a much greater significance. It is about the welcome that the Jewish people – represented by Mary and Joseph – give to the other nations – represented here by the magi. This is made clear by the reading from Isaiah. To some extent Isaiah foretells the details of the magis' visit in the reference of gold and incense - although he knows nothing of the myrrh. But whereas Matthew is vague about the origin of the magi, Isaiah is quite clear: Midian and Ephah, 200 miles away in what we know as Saudi Arabia, and Sheba, which may be what we know as Yemen, a thousand miles away. This was pretty much the edge of the known world. At their worst, the Jewish people of the Old Testament could be insular and bigoted; at their best they knew that their calling was to share the good news of God's love with the whole world. This passage from Isaiah is part of the latter tradition. And so is the visit of the magi. The visit of the magi is the symbolic culmination of the tradition that the purpose of the Jewish people is to call all nations to the Lord, to welcome all nations.

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Isaiah 60:3

And Paul knew that. He knew that the good news of God's love was not to be kept for the Jewish people but to be shared with the whole world. So he wrote to the Ephesians,

The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body,
and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ephesians 3:6

The good news for us is that we, as the gentiles, are included in God's love. The words of Isaiah and Paul were good news for the gentiles, the nations; but they were also an encouragement, even a warning to the religious establishment that it was their responsibility to draw in the nations, to include all men and women in God's kingdom.

But time has moved on. The Christian Church has now existed for longer than the Jewish covenant had existed at the time of Jesus. We are now the religious establishment. And so the words of Isaiah and Paul are an encouragement, even a warning to us, that we must be active in including the gentiles, the nations.

So who are the gentiles now whom we must not exclude? Let me give you one example. A few years ago I found myself giving a lift home to a woman who was emotionally in a bad way after the end of a long term relationship with another woman. I cannot remember why I did such a thing but I asked her whether she was aware of much animosity about her sexuality. 'No', she replied, 'except from Christians'. A few weeks later she took her own life.

But the welcome of today's gospel works the other way as well: the magi welcome Jesus; the nations welcome The Lord. The distance travelled, the star they followed, the gifts they bring make it very clear that this is no ordinary baby they are welcoming. They recognize that the child of Bethlehem is God incarnate.

When I was about seven I remembered being a little concerned about whether I would recognize Jesus if I met him in the street. I would have had no problem if he had appeared in first century middle-eastern dress: such clothes were unknown in 1960's Warwickshire. I would have had more difficulty in C21st Thornbury or Pudsey! But what if he had worn jeans or a business suit? Would I have been able to tell him from all the others so dressed?

I no longer have the same problem. Having read the parable of the sheep and the goats I now know that I will meet Jesus in the marginalized: the poor, the homeless, the prisoners, the hungry, the thirsty, the asylum seeker, those who are gay, people of colour, women. The problem is not knowing it; the problem is remembering it and acting upon it. The problem sometimes is knowing how to do it.

At the Devolvement Committee last week we had a discussion about how we welcome and include people in St James Church. We recognized that it is difficult and we don't always do it well. In that respect we are like very other church in the country! I know of no church that would not think of itself as welcoming and friendly. I know of no church that would not describe itself as welcoming and friendly. But the real question is, welcoming and friendly to whom? Sadly the answer is often, welcoming and friendly to our friends. And to the outside that appears as being cliquish; and being cliquish is by definition being unwelcoming and exclusive. No church ever does that deliberately. It always happens by mistake. It always happens because we are not conscious of what we are doing. Being welcoming and

friendly to the stranger requires a deliberate effort. It requires a conscious decision not to focus my attention on those who I know well but on those whom I do not know, those who are visitors. It does not mean fussing, throwing myself upon them. It does mean being aware of them. It means noticing if they seem lost in the service; it means noticing whether they seem unsure about coming up for communion; it means noticing if they seem not to have the right books; it might mean deliberately sitting near a stranger so that you can notice. It may mean giving up your seat so that the stranger can have a more convenient one. And if you are busy doing that you may not be able to focus on catching up with your friends. That is exactly how it should be.

And it goes beyond our worship. If someone walks into the Church or the Centre while we are drinking coffee we might ask 'Can I help you' but we need to ask in such a way that it sounds genuine and not 'Why are you in my space?' And if we at any of the weekdays groups, Soulfood, Toddler Group, Eat, Talk and Pray, the Derby Place afternoon tea, the Friendship Tea, our focus needs to be on those who are at the edge, not those in the middle, those we do not know, not those who are our friends. The price of not doing this is that others will write us off as cliquish, unfriendly. And if that is how others feel then we are cliquish, we are unfriendly.

But it does not come naturally. And Bishop Toby knows that. And so he is providing some training on how to do it. It is intriguingly entitled *Stretch Wide Your Curtain*, another quotation from the prophet Isaiah (ch 54v2) . It would be good to have a group attending from both churches, to learn a few skills in welcoming and then to come and share them with the rest of us. It is a very practical working out of The Epiphany. Will you make that commitment? Will you give up a Saturday morning to learn how to welcome your wise men, your mysterious stranger? Will you give up a Saturday morning to learn how to welcome Jesus just like those wise men?

N Clews
7th January 2018

Saturday 20th January 2018
9.30am – 12.15pm
St. Martin's Church
130, Haworth Road Bradford BD9 6LL