

Epiphany, January 5th, 2024

10.30 Holy Communion

Isaiah 60.1-6, Ephesians 3.1-12, Matthew 2.1-12

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

On Christmas Day 1622, Lancelot Andrews preached before King James I at Whitehall on the first two verses of Matthew Chapter 2. His sermon began with the words

A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in 'the very dead of winter'

Words of course that were used as the opening lines of T S Elliott's "The journey of the Magi", which goes on

*And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

But as eloquent and as wonderful as Andrew's prose and Elliot's poetry is, it has to be said, it almost certainly doesn't really capture the reality of what happened, any more than most Christmas cards do, with a steady stream of characters waiting to visit the Christ-child in the stable one after another, trying to push by the sheep, cows and donkeys and being careful to avoid squadrons of low flying angels.

So let's consider what probably did happen. Whilst not contradicting Luke's account in any significant way, Matthew does choose his subject matter carefully. It reflects the perspective of Joseph, whilst Luke's account seems to come from Mary. Matthew's narrative is structured to draw attention to the parallels between the birth of Jesus and the Moses / Exodus story – the baby Jesus forced to flee from Herod, the Pharaoh figure, into and out of Egypt, with the death of the firstborn in the Exodus story being paralleled

with the slaughter of the innocents. Within this Matthews's account of the visit of the wise men is sparse and brief, and often felt by many to a legendary construct, that was put together to reflect the verses from Isaiah that we have just read

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

I think however giving a little thought to what was going on in that part of the world at that time, suggests the story has a much firmer basis than some would think, and I would suggest is firmly rooted in history. The area around Judea and Galilee was very much a frontier area at that time. To the west there was the Roman empire that had brought the area under its control about 40 years earlier and installed Herod as ruler. Because of his efficiency and brutality in farming tax revenue, the Roman Senate voted to give him the title of King. By the time of the nativity, he was old, and in ill health suffering from gangrene, convulsions, ulcers and fevers. To the east, there was the empire of the Parthians, a steppe people who had effectively taken over the Persian and Greek empires in the area. And there was constant tension, small scale fighting between the two empires as they tried to influence the small vassal states on their boundary – think of the situation in Moldova, Georgia, the Baltic States etc for modern parallels.

But who were the Magi? The word Magi of course is the route word for magic – something that the gospel writer would have wanted to avoid if he could, which adds to the feeling of authenticity in the gospel account. But Matthew would know the word from the Old Testament Book of Daniel, where Daniel himself is named as a leader of the Magi when the Jews were in exile in Persia. These Magi formed the civil service who administered the vast empire that ran from the middle east to the borders of India. These were highly educated administrators but also seem to have had something of a priestly role within the religion of Zoroastrianism and were adept in astronomy and astrology. Again, this gives a level of veracity to the story - to admit that God spoke through non-Jews, following a very different religion, and well versed in astrology was not something the gospel writer would have included given the chance. And perhaps it also disturbs some of our Christian presuppositions that God might act in this way.

In any case, we are told that it was some of these Magi who saw the “star” rising in the east – probably a conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. They may well have had access to the Jewish scriptures, at least those from the period of the exile, in the large Babylonian archive and would have known of the Jewish expectation of a Messiah. Then they sent some of their party – we don't know how many but almost certainly not three - to Jerusalem to look for the king of the Jews that their astrological observations predicted. Perhaps they went, as Elliott suggests,

*With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

Probably they would have travelled with an armed escort as would befit their status as senior ambassadors or civil servants. As a parallel think of Thomas Grammer and Thomas Cromwell in Wolf Hall going around the countries dissolving the monasteries, with an armed escort to persuade the monks that it was in their interest to go along with what they wished. So, when this party showed up in Jerusalem asking where the King of the

Jews was to be born there must have been considerable consternation and suspicion amongst the ruling and the priestly classes. Were they trying to start a diplomatic incident or stir up a war or something. Herod was old and paranoid, and very suspicious of anything that might challenge him – he had in the previous three years disposed of a number of his sons and wives who he thought were trying to oust him. Even the Emperor Augustus, himself hardly a softie, thought that Herod was a bit over the top. Then we know the story. The Magi were sent off to Bethlehem from where the book of Micah suggested the Messiah would come from. There they experienced the only supernatural event of the entire story – the sign that led them to the house where the Holy Family were, whatever that might have been. But if the greater miracle of God taking flesh is believed, some sort of supernatural light over a house is a relatively minor mystery. There they encountered the baby in the manger and presented their gifts. The church through history has loaded these gifts with layers of symbolic meaning – frankincense for prayers to a deity, acknowledging who Jesus was; myrrh for the anointing of the dead, foreshadowing his death, burial and resurrection; and gold for kingship, the one now enthroned above all things – and there is some justification for such an identification in retrospect, although it is unlikely the Magi made such an identification themselves. Probably they were simply regarded as precious things, fit for a king. After presenting their gifts they were warned by God in a dream not to go back to Herod, which again to our rational way of thinking seems a bit odd. Throughout the bible, however, God speaks in dreams and visions – indeed the bible would be a lot thinner if He didn't, so we shouldn't dismiss this possibility either then, or indeed now for us. And whilst that is where our reading ends, the story doesn't end there – Herod is incensed and orders all young children in Bethlehem under the age of two to be put to the sword. There probably weren't that many of them as Bethlehem was probably quite a small town, so it wasn't a particularly big deal for someone like Herod. And a consideration of what is going on in the world today, of the actions of modern-day tyrants and dictators, shows that such a scenario is quite plausible, with children often bearing the brunt of the tyrant's wrath. Joseph, again warned in a dream, hurriedly left for the southern border and the relative safety of Egypt. As an aside, I have always wondered what happened to the gifts of the Magi – perhaps used to finance the escape into Egypt? Herod died soon after (probably very soon after), and again Joseph dreamed – the first time an angel telling him to return, and the second time, after his reluctance because of the accession of Herod's son, Herod Archelaus, and the well documented uprising and revenge attacks that followed, to go back to the relative safety of the northern town of Nazareth. A remarkable record of God directing the actions of men in a sustained and detailed way.

Just what were the Magi expecting I wonder? Probably not a peasant girl, in a house in a small provincial town. But nonetheless they seem to have realised that something important was happening. We are told their hearts were filled with joy as they approached the house. When they left, they were receptive to warnings in their dreams, and their journey didn't take the course they expected but probably followed a less direct, roundabout route home. Elliot ends his poem with an imaginative view of their thoughts.

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down*

This set down

*This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

The Magi, as I said, were probably Zoroastrians – followers of Ahura Mazda in the unending battle, between good and evil, light and dark. And perhaps Elliot, although his picturing of the historical context is probably a bit dodgy, is right in his imaginings here – they saw in the baby something different, the light of the world, the light that darkness cannot extinguish, and they came to realise that their old dispensation was not enough.

And for us – what are we to make of it all? It is a wonderful story of course, and one that, I would suggest in its context, is quite plausible. We have here, in my view, no once-upon-a-time fairy story, but the relating of real events of enormous consequence. And no doubt it has many things to teach us about how to lead our lives as Christian disciples. But this morning, I suggest we simply follow in the footsteps of the Magi and come, in our imagination, to the Christ child in the manger in wonder, awe and worship, reflecting on what we see there, Jesus in all his vulnerability. He was born at a time when childbirth was dangerous; when infant mortality was very high, not to mention the threats to his life by the powerful forces swirling around him. Yet in his vulnerability and weakness, we are called to see and worship God incarnate – God in human form. To quote the hymn

Incense owns a deity nigh

This is the greater miracle, against which all the visions of angels and astronomical events seem to fade into insignificance. In the opening sentences of his gospel, the Evangelist John seeks to capture this in his majestic words.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us

If the miracle of the incarnation of God as a baby is true, then it changes everything – how we understand the world, how we understand ourselves, how we understand those around us – in the light of the overwhelming love of God who became man to die on the cross and to rise again, to reconcile all things to himself. Our old dispensations, whatever they are, are no longer enough. So, as we continue this morning with prayer and worship, receiving the bread and wine. let's hold the vision of the Christ child in our minds and hearts and ponder and reflect on the enormity of the incarnation, and the implications for our lives. and bring our offerings to him of our very selves, our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice,

We end with the words of Richard Cranshaw, a Stuart contemporary of Lancelot Andrews, as he reflects on the same theme.

*Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span;
Summer in winter; day in night;
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav'n to earth.*