

EPIPHANY JAN 6.08 A

The Feast of EPIPHANY brings to us one of the great stories associated with Christmas. It greatly adds to the dramatic presentations of Christmas plays, and excites the imagination with all sorts of images.

It is a very important part of the whole story, and in the Orthodox Churches it is the main feast associated with the birth of Jesus.

Our translation terms the visitors as “wise men from the East”, but like many commentators I would rather stick with the old biblical word “Magi” as their descriptor. Magi originally referred to a caste of Persian priests with a special claim to interpret dreams. In our story they appear more as astronomers/astrologers who looked to the skies to guide them as to major events that had taken or were taking place. Because they did not know where the “king” was born indicates that they were certainly Gentiles. Exactly where the “East” meant is unclear, but the gifts they carried suggest either the Syrian desert or Arabia - their exact origins will always remain somewhat of a mystery.

They came first to Jerusalem with the question: Matthew 2:2 (NRSV)

2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

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Such a question would have thrown Jerusalem into a real tizz, Herod – always feeling under threat, would be very anxious - he would brook no rivals. And we know what he ends up doing.

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

We will see this title used later; it will be the title attached to the Cross on Good Friday.

“For we observed his star at its rising”: it was common in the ancient world that great events – especially the birth or death of a great figure should be accompanied by some astral phenomena.

There has been much conjecture about the nature of what actually happened in the skies: it may have been the sighting of the

conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter – which happened in 7 BC, it could have been a comet or a supernova, we don't know, and does it really matter?

Matthew clearly sees it as a fulfillment of the motif found in the book of Numbers:

Numbers 24:17a (NRSV)

17 I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near—

a star shall come out of Jacob,

and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;.

“...and have come to pay him homage” : the Magi came to pay homage: the word used indicates the attitude one would show before a the greatest of personages, or the attitude a person would show before God. Again, the narrative is carrying forward the theme of Jesus as Son of God.

And so the story continues with the Magi being directed to Bethlehem, the place from where the Messiah would come. This tradition was very strong in Israel, and is recalled in John's Gospel when the crowds were questioning “who is this Jesus?”

John 7:42 (NRSV)

42 Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?”

And so the Magi come to Bethlehem and find the child: they come and worship, they offer their gifts.

It is because there are three gifts mentioned: gold, frankincense and myrrh that the tradition of 3 Magi arose. A possible allusion to Psalm 72 perhaps gives rise to the idea of them as kings: Psalm 72:10 (NRSV)

10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

Now let us focus on these three: they are strangers to Israel, they were not born or brought up within the traditions of Israel. They were not part of the 'chosen people', but they come to pay homage to the new born King.

These strangers are led to the Son of God.

They offer their gifts - gold, frankincense and myrrh – symbols of Jesus being born to be a King – unto death.

After their meeting with the Holy Family, they respond to the warning given to them in a dream and they return to their own country, but by a different route.

The Magi are not part of the 'chosen people' but have been chosen by God from out of the Gentile world, and they come in faith and love.

The story of the joyful and positive response of the Magi is matched by the opposite reaction from those who should have known better.

The religious leaders in Jerusalem, the sacred city of God, know the Scriptures, they know the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah; yet when they are told of the child's birth they react with complete hostility.

They do not have the openness to see the revelation of God present in this child.

Their hostility leads to the murder of The Innocents.

The Epiphany is, as the older and longer title informs us, "The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles" this is the cause of our celebration today:

God, from the very birth of the Child makes the Good News available to the whole world; not just "the chosen people"

The story serves as a warning to us:

Like the Magi – we have no special privileges - they simply responded to the sign which God gave them.

The Chosen People in the sacred City, Jerusalem, are threatened when their 'religion' is disturbed by the coming of Jesus.

We “Chosen Ones”, with our rich tradition and history are challenged, challenged by the presence of God in our lives.

God's in breaking challenges our traditions, our way of doing things, our politics, our customs: will we react like the 'religious people' of Jerusalem, or, will we be like the Magi, Joseph and Mary - responding in faith and obedience?

The life and teaching of Jesus will always threaten our comfort, It calls us to great love.

We might proclaim Jesus as Lord,
But our lives must show that truth!

[1] <#_ftnref1> The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version. 1996, c1989. Thomas Nelson: Nashville