

December 23, 2018    The Wisdom of the Wise    Matthew 2:1-12

There is a good reason why our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic tradition, and the Anglican tradition and some other church families recognize the season of Epiphany. The Oxford Dictionary tells us this about Epiphany. “The manifestation of Christ to the Magi; the festival of (January 6). Their tradition of Epiphany recognizes the tradition, verified by the teaching of Scripture in the Gospel of Matthew, that the Magi arrived in Bethlehem and saw Mary and Joseph and their baby, Jesus, after what we call the New Year, had begun.

Which is to say, if we are going to be concerned about historical accuracy and the truth of the matter, the Magi were not there at the stable, with the animals gathered around, the shepherds having come from the hills, the angels singing and bringing their light to bear on the light of the world. I want to be very clear about this: our nativity sets, the creches that we erect, the Christmas pageants that we enact are not accurate in every degree. The Magi arrived later, not at Christmas at all. Unlike the shepherds, they did not see the infant Jesus lying in a manger. By the time they arrived, as Matthew tells us clearly, it was “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that the Magi came, journeying from the east. It was “on coming to the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts.”

And as much as I want to be clear, that the Magi came after Jesus was born in the stable, I also want to be clear about this: there is a reason that our Nativity sets portray the scene as they do. There is a reason that our Pageants present the events as they do. They make the point, and they teach the point, that Jesus was born in humble circumstances. Our nativity sets, and pageants, the television portrayals, and the films also teach this truth embedded in the Gospel accounts: everyone who was there, the angels, the shepherds, the Magi came to the infant Jesus to worship HIM and offer their praise to the God who saves people from their sin.

In other words, there is nothing wrong with a nativity set, or a pageant, so long as we accompany those traditional elements with the Biblical truth about the birth of our Saviour.

The Magi were priests. Their religion was astrology. They watched the heavens using ancient charts (extremely accurate charts by the way, regarding movements of the stars and planets) in hopes of reading the signs of future occurrences. It was in doing their work that they discovered a new star, a new phenomenon in the night sky, which they translated as a sign of the birth of a King who would save HIS people. So moved were they by the combination of what they could see in the night sky, and what they read in Jewish

prophetic literature, that they decided to travel, regardless of the time, the expense or the risks, in order that they might worship this remarkable and unique figure. They journeyed by the guidance of the apparent star. They arrived in Jerusalem. They were honest and truthful about their reasons for making the journey, engaging in this quest. They sought information about the whereabouts of this new born King, and in the quest they shared their story, their testimony... “we have seen HIS star, and are come to worship HIM.” In fact they are so honest and open with information about their motives, they are almost naïve as they meet political figures of the time, like Herod of Judea. It is only later, when they have seen the baby Jesus, and are in fact planning their journey home that they become aware of the grave danger they are in, to say nothing of the danger to which they have exposed the child. And it is their testimony, not Matthew’s: it is the testimony of the Magi, that an angel of the living God revealed to them the way they should go, and the reason they should go by a different route, not returning to Herod, as they had agreed to do.

And how interesting it is, that following the route, revealed to them by the angel, they exit the stage of world history, never to be seen or heard from again. Yes, there is a tradition that there were three of them. There is a tradition that their names were Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar. It is also true that as a boy I was asked to sing in Balthazar’s name at St. George’s Anglican Church on a Christmas Eve... “Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, Breaths a life of gathering gloom,

Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, Sealed in the stone cold tomb.” I understood very little about what I was singing or portraying at the time, but I am emotional about the fact those words were in my mouth as I played the character of Balthazar...and I will come back to that.

We call them in everyday common talk at this time of year, the Wise Men. We say they were wise because they sought Jesus when the balance of the world was unaware of his birth, or of the significance of HIS life, which would include death and resurrection. We call them wise because they were so open about the fact that they journeyed and risked for this singular reason of desiring to worship HIM. And of course it is that which our nativity sets and pageants portray so clearly. For that reason (I went to the nativity set Barbara sets up in our home to check this out before I wrote it) our nativity set portrays Melchior and Gaspar on their knees. Balthazar is standing waiting his turn, gift in hand, “Myrrh is mine.” The wisdom of the wise is that they worship the King who comes to save. This was a life changing journey, made by the Magi, the Wise Men.

Epiphany forever means the Wise Men, Magi from the east, met Mary and recognized Jesus as the Christ. Christmas, when it is recognized as being about Jesus and all the circumstances that were part of HIS birth, is a life changing journey. Angels signify God is revealed in this reality. The star reminds us the cosmos marks the season. Shepherds remind us

no one is untouchable when it comes to the truth about Jesus. HE came for all. And the Wise not only search for HIM, they find HIM, and they recognize HIS very nature. The gift of gold, because HE is KING of kings. The gift of frankincense because HE is God. Myrrh to anoint the dead body taken down from the cross...sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone cold tomb. The gift for HIS passion.

And why when they leave to go home do they just vanish from the stage of history? Would not make sense that they should have written books, memoirs, one proclaiming Jesus authority, one exploring Jesus divinity, one detailing Jesus crucifixion? Here is an uncompromising truth about Christmas. While we will enjoy so many different traditions as part of this “most wonderful time of the year,” it is not about the prophets, they played their part. It is not about the star. It appeared. Several times according to modern astronomy. It is not about the shepherds or the angels, or Mary or Joseph. It is first and last about Jesus. I say Merry Christmas and I mean it. I wish you every happiness. I wish you peace and joy, no matter what is occurring in the world, or making your moments a trial. Enjoy the feast. Share in the fellowship. May the gifts you receive and give be pleasing. But most of all remember the wisdom of the wise. Seek Jesus. Worship Him. Recognize HIS offering of eternal life. Remember that HE is the reason for the season, and the source of its wonder and joy.

Let us pray,

Lord, the wisemen, the Magi, are almost always portrayed among us as being on their knees before you. Grant that our lives too might be an offering up of ourselves to you and your service, including our serving of others instead of ourselves. We thank you for those who have ministered to us this Advent, as we have participated in the journey defined by a measure of faith. Grant us your peace, your hope, your joy, through faith in Jesus. Amen