

EPIPHANY Matthew 2: 1-12

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Father, we thank you that you made yourself known to the wise men who came seeking you. Make yourself known to us today, we pray. Amen.

So today we come to the end of our Christmas celebrations, and it's lovely to be able to celebrate the Epiphany on January 6, the very day set for the feast. In some parts of the world, today is the day when Christians give each other presents, recalling the gifts of the wise men to the infant Jesus. For us it marks the end of the season of the nativity. We have celebrated the birth, the incarnation, the revelation of God in human form, and now it is time to move on from looking at the baby Jesus, and to learn what it means to live with the grown-up Jesus.

What has struck me particularly over this Christmas season, with all the different readings and services, is just how much moving around there is, how much coming and going: we have Mary travelling to visit her cousin Elizabeth, we have Joseph and Mary travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, we have the shepherds getting up and leaving their sheep to walk into the town, and now we have the wise men travelling from afar, seeking the new king. And each journey marks a new stage in the life of the one who makes it. None of them is ever quite the same afterwards. And so it is today: so often in the gospels we hear the words 'come and see': seeking and finding Jesus can demand some effort, some movement on our part, but once we have made that journey, we shall never be quite the same.

Our Christian tradition has made much of these few verses: there have been different traditions as to which countries these magi, or wise men, came from, they have even been given different names

in different parts of the worldwide Church. There have been different explanations as to the meaning of the gifts they brought. For instance, while most recognise that gold is an offering worthy of a king, and frankincense belongs to the deity, to God, myrrh has been seen to represent either death, because of its use in the embalming process, or as the oil of healing – both of course applicable to Jesus.

There is little that we can know for sure, and Matthew is the only one of our Gospel writers to mention the visit of these wise men. There is some reference to them in other early texts, but these were not considered reliable enough in their entirety to be part of the canon, part of the official New Testament. Writings show that the early church valued this part of the Christmas story. So why is it important?

We have often made it quite a cosy, attractive picture, but that is not Matthew's intention. He isn't telling a nice story, he is talking about political dynamite. Here, in the court of King Herod, we see fear, suspicion, subterfuge and deceit, leading to the murder of innocent children. If this baby really is the new king, it is bad news for the existing king, Herod: it means the end of his own family's dynasty, the end of their rule over Israel. It means that power would slip from his grasp, and from that of his courtiers too. No wonder they are rattled by what these magi have to say.

And for the ordinary Jewish people too there is much here to be alarmed at. These men have travelled from afar, they are Gentiles, outsiders, foreigners – how come they get to hear about the new King of the Jews before the Jews themselves? That can't be right, can it? Surely the Jews have a monopoly on communication with God? Surely they are the ones to whom God has chosen to make himself known?

Well, as the gospel continues we shall find Jesus himself coming to recognise that God is at work in Gentiles as well as Jews, culminating in the great commission to the disciples, at the end of the Gospel, when Jesus tells them to go to *all* the nations, making them disciples, telling them the good news of God's love. So here, with the story of the Epiphany, right at the start of Matthew's Gospel, the old rigid boundaries of religion are being torn down. The revolution has started.

So who were these men, whom Matthew calls the magi? These were the scholars of their day, studying the stars, the universe, making connections; they were the scientists of their time. They have come to be thought of as kings because they must have been pretty wealthy to spend so much time making that sort of journey, and because the gifts they brought with them were the kind of gift that rich rulers might give one another. Whether they were magi or kings, what is extraordinary is their reaction to the baby Jesus. When they find him, they fall on their knees and pay him homage, they humble themselves before him, recognising his authority over them.

That's not the sort of behaviour any king would willingly adopt: usually it would only happen when a king had been conquered in battle by another king and was forced to acknowledge defeat and hand over his power to the victor. Right from the start, it is clear that these men see in Jesus so much more than meets the eye, a tiny helpless baby. There isn't even a fine palace or fancy robes or squads of servants that might persuade them that this really is a young prince, a king in the making. All they have to go on is the witness of the star, the peculiar astrological phenomenon that has alerted them to something important taking place here.

They have been drawn to follow the star, they have had to persevere for mile after weary mile, they have not given up, they

have kept faith, even when they could see no result. They have kept on searching. And then the star comes to a halt, and they know they have reached the end of their long journey. How do they react? They are overjoyed with exceeding great joy, we are told. There is no sense of 'Well, is that all? Just a baby in an old outhouse? What's that all about then?' No, with the eyes of faith they can see in Jesus the Lord of life, the bringer of hope, the king of all, who will show what true kingship is all about. And they know he is worthy to receive their gifts and their homage.

This is their Epiphany – what we might call their 'light-bulb moment'; for that is the literal meaning of epiphany, light upon something. The inner light that makes us able to see. I've said before that so much of faith is about being able to SEE, to see beyond the surface, to look beyond the obvious, to let God show himself in all sorts of unexpected ways, unexpected places and people. But in order to be able to see, you have to be ready and willing for it to happen. Imagine if King Herod himself had come to the stable and seen the baby Jesus. What do you think he would have seen? Just a poor child, not worth bothering about? Would he have laughed at the foolishness of the magi? Or would he have been sufficiently rattled by the prophecies to think he'd better destroy this child before he might get any notions of taking over as king? Do you think Herod would have been able to recognise in Jesus the Son of God, the true King of all? I suspect not.

Not everyone recognises Jesus for who he is, not at his birth, not in his lifetime, not in his death, not even in his resurrection. So why is it that some can see and others just cannot? That is surely a big question for us, as Christians. Part of the answer, I think, lies in our own willingness and openness to the new, the unexpected, even the downright unlikely. Does that mean that we, as believers, are just gullible, willing to believe anything people tell us?

Many people do indeed think we are foolish, a bit simple minded. And we can't persuade others by reasoned argument. Many minds are totally closed to the possibility of there being a God, let alone a human being who is God's son! They just can't see it.

But on the other side, there are those whose faith in the invisible is utterly unshakeable. Most of us here, I think, have faith, a faith that is deep inside us, something we know is true, even if we don't have the words to explain it to others. We have come to that faith, not because someone persuaded us with clever arguments, but because, by God's grace, we have *experienced* something, maybe some kind of help in our hour of need, some source of hope in a time of despair, some security in time of trouble, some kind of strength when we felt at our weakest, some kind of peace when everything had gone wrong, or the peace of forgiveness when we have finally acknowledged that we ourselves have done wrong and are incapable of putting it right. And in that *experience*, we recognise the work of God, the love of God, the power of God. It is something inside us that we cannot ignore or fully explain, but it lives in us and shapes our lives.

And what Matthew describes in those first wise men is an *experience*: what happened to them? Their hearts were filled with exceeding great joy! They were overwhelmed with a deep sense of joy! Why? Because clearly, they now saw that all their searching and travelling, all the effort they had made had finally borne fruit. They had found in this child whatever it was they were looking for: was it hope for the future, the promise of justice and mercy and peace? We don't know. But we do know that they had a deep experience of something inexplicable and overwhelming, an experience that changed their lives. And that kind of experience can be ours too. Like the wise men, we have to be ready for it, we have to be open to it, we have to make some effort, maybe some sacrifice too, of time and energy, we have to be genuinely and

sincerely seeking, and then, like the wise men, we shall be rewarded.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew urges us: listen to the whole story, think about what it really means for Jesus to be the true king of the Jews. And then come to him, by whatever route you can, and bring the best gift you can offer: your heart. Amen.