

Matthew 2:1-12, EPIPHANY 05 Jan 2020

CCO & StJN

Father, take these words and use them, I pray, to draw us closer to you. Amen.

So today we celebrate what has become one of the key elements of our Christmas story: the coming of the wise men to see the infant Jesus. Often they appear as part of the nativity scene, although Matthew makes it clear that it is 'some time later.' Some scholars think it unlikely that this episode ever really happened. Others think it quite probable given the conditions and expectations of those days. Either way, it has a lot to tell us. Looking back, I found that this is at least the fifth time I have preached on this passage, so I did wonder if I might just recycle an old sermon! Would anybody notice?? But, I decided that was not the right approach!

It is important to put these verses in their context. Only Matthew's Gospel has this story of the three wise men. He tells us that they were magi, the scholars of those days who would study the natural world and especially the movements of the stars and the planets. It was believed in those days that everything in the universe was interconnected, so that if something extraordinary happened on earth, it was likely to show up in the heavens. And if something extraordinary appeared in the heavens, it probably meant that something important was happening on earth. Later, we lost that sense of everything being connected, interlinked, but now at last we are learning to see how interrelated everything in creation really is, and the idea that a special star in the sky indicated some special happening on earth is not so far-fetched. Certainly not for Matthew: you will remember that in Matthew's Gospel, at the moment of Jesus's death, the sky goes dark and there is an earthquake. Momentous events on earth are reflected in the rest of creation.

Matthew was writing his Gospel for a community of Christians who were mainly Jewish converts. He begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus, his family tree. This is not just of historic

interest. He starts with Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people, comes down the line, through King David and ends with Jesus. We must note that on the way, he includes four women as key ancestors, not only women, but Gentiles too. Again, this gives us a clue as to what Matthew's Gospel message is about.

Throughout the Gospel, there is an emphasis on Jewishness of Jesus, but Jesus is shown as fulfilling the prophecies of the OT, as the one in whom God's covenant with his people finally comes good.

There are a host of hints that Jesus is like a second and superior Moses: The Jews already revered Moses as the one who had led them to salvation, out of slavery in Egypt.

Like Moses, Jesus is born in enemy territory, under foreign rule. He is not safe.

Just after the visit of the wise men, Matthew tells how Herod ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys in Bethlehem, under the age of two, and Matthew's readers would immediately remember how the Pharaoh in Egypt had ordered the slaughter of all the Hebrew baby boys at the time when Moses was born.

Moses came out of Egypt to place of safety and new life; Jesus, like Joseph and Jacob his ancestors, first has to go to Egypt, but then later leaves Egypt for new life in the Holy Land.

Moses had his mountain-top experience as Jesus has his baptism (of which more next week) and the transfiguration, in which both men are prepared for the work ahead. And for both Moses and Jesus, that experience is followed by time in the wilderness.

Matthew is clearly wanting us to know that Jesus is all that Moses was and more. Indeed, in Matthew we find Jesus called Son of David, David the great king on whom the Israelites looked, and some still do look back, with awe and hope.

So, Matthew is establishing Jesus' true Jewish credentials, and seeing in him the fulfilment of Israel's hopes and dreams, of God's promises to his people. That is the message of our reading from Isaiah this morning: what was promised for Jerusalem has finally come true for all humanity in Jesus.

At the same time Matthew is telling us to see in Jesus what it meant to be a true Jew, a true Israelite – a people who God intended to be a 'light to the gentiles', something which they had failed to do. The Messiah had come, not primarily to rid the people of the occupying enemy forces, but to lead them, like Moses, in a new Exodus, out of the land of darkness and sorrow, of bondage to sin and death, into his Kingdom, a kingdom of the heart. He had come so that people would be reconciled to God, would know his love for them and be given his life.

I sometimes think the whole of the Old Testament is like a snowball that gets bigger and bigger as it rolls along and more and more insights are revealed until finally Jesus is born and it's like a great explosion, the whole truth finally revealed, the light bursting in on the darkness. The Epiphany, which is of course what we celebrate today. The bringing into the light of God's truth.

Can anyone remember how Matthew's Gospel ends? With the great commission, to preach the Gospel to all the peoples. There is nothing inward looking about this Gospel, nothing parochial. It's not just for the Jews to enjoy! And Matthew is showing us this right here at the start of his Gospel, with this episode of the wise men: these Gentiles, the foreigners, the strange ones - *these* are the ones who 'get it'. These are the ones who recognise who Jesus is. So this story of the wise men at the beginning and the great commission of Jesus at the end are like the book ends of Matthew's Gospel, making it clear right from the start that yes, Jesus is the Messiah, but not the sort of Messiah the Jews were expecting. And yes, in Jesus we are to see that God's plan of salvation is not just for the Jews, but for the whole world.

We had a wedding recently and I was invited to join the guests in the Snooty Fox afterwards, which was lovely. I got talking to a group of ladies, one of whom, having had quite a tough life, had trained as a life coach and now runs courses to help damaged women; with her was another lady who had been through a terrible time, but had been on the courses, had been greatly helped by them and is now working with the homeless. These were ladies who would never normally step foot inside a church, but they recognised the message about love in the wedding sermon. It resonated deeply with them. They knew what I was talking about. It was clear to me that God is already out there at work in them. And they are doing the kind of work I think God wants us to be doing.

Goodness knows, there is so much hurt and unhappiness out there, and people don't think the church has anything to offer them. How will they know, unless we take that caring to them? We can invite them to a service, but they need to know first what they're going to find here. They probably aren't all that interested in hymns and Bible readings. But we can make sure they find in us people of welcome and kindness and acceptance, a group of people alive with the hope that God gives us.

I spoke last week of God turning up in unexpected places and people. Have you ever imagined how Mary and Joseph must have felt when these three clever, wealthy, well-dressed fellas walked in, presented their very valuable gifts, and proceeded to pay homage to the baby Jesus! Who would have thought it?

And what about these wise men themselves? They were expecting to find a king of some sort, and they looked and they looked. They kept on searching, and then, when they saw Jesus, they had their Epiphany: the eyes of their minds were opened to look beyond all their preconceptions and prejudice, and to recognise that here they saw a revelation of God himself, God made flesh, the new king coming into the world like any other baby, sharing our weakness and vulnerability, but full of God-given potential.

I was struck down by some sort of tummy bug last week, and while I was stuck at home, making myself starve, and therefore not doing anything much, I decided to do a jigsaw. And as I was finishing it yesterday, it occurred to me that there are parallels between doing a jigsaw and our search for God!

To begin with, it's all a bit bewildering. Where do you start? If you're like me, you latch on to the outside bits, at least they give you a bit of a clue, a framework to get you going. Then it's a matter of looking and looking, and trying to work out what it is you're seeing. Every now and then there is a revelation, an 'Aha!' moment as a piece drops into place. Very often it is an unexpected piece that is needed to fill a particular gap. And then, as more of the picture takes shape before you, it becomes a bit easier, you seem to make more rapid progress, and you feel you're getting somewhere. And then you find yourself left with the hard bits, the sky, or the sea, and then you really have to look hard and try and see the pieces in a new way, noticing little things that had escaped you before. And little by little, the whole picture emerges and brings you joy.

Let's pray:

Father, we ask you to give us the diligence, the yearning and the persistence of the wise men, so that we too may recognise you, wherever you are, and rejoice at finding you. Amen.