

Reflection for Sunday 3rd January (Epiphany)

Bible reading:

Matthew 2.1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Reflection.

Today we celebrate the feast of Epiphany. The Book of Common Prayer describes Epiphany as being when Jesus is revealed to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are represented by the wise men coming from the east maybe from modern day Iraq or Iran. Were they king's? They might have been but we don't really know. We don't know whether there were three of them either. The bible only mentions three different gifts.

They were astronomers who had seen a special star. People have speculated about what they might have seen in the night sky. In about 7BC there was a combination of Jupiter and Saturn overlapping in the night sky three times within a year. To the ancients, Jupiter was the royal or kingly planet whilst Saturn was sometimes thought of as representing the Jews. So the natural conclusion for the wise men to make was that this sighting represented a new king of the Jews.

Have you ever thought that the people who visited Jesus were a bit of a strange combination? The wise men were almost certainly wealthy. They could embark on a long journey with all the attendant cost of that, and they could afford to bring the kind of gifts that people would normally offer to royalty. They were also learned men, they studied the stars and knew how to interpret them.

What a contrast to the shepherds who had visited Jesus earlier. Shepherds were not rich and not educated. They were rough and ready people who lived out in the open air where there was not much chance to bathe or to get a clean set of clothes – the kind of people that you could probably smell coming from a distance.

The shepherds appear in Luke's account whilst the kings are in Matthew's. My colleague Richard Cooke is one of the bishop's staff and a great teacher about the new testament. He describes the four gospel accounts as being like four different newspapers. They are all telling the same story but each one has a different perspective and so they emphasise different things. Luke's gospel is sometimes called the social gospel because he focuses on Jesus coming as the saviour of the poor, the dispossessed and the outcasts and so it's natural for him to tell us about the rough and ready shepherds.

Matthew wants to tell us about how Jesus is Israel's Messiah but also the saviour of every nation; the king of kings through whom people from all the nations of earth can be God's chosen people.

Both of those things are true. God's big picture is that Jesus is Lord and Saviour for everyone; even me; even you.

Rich or poor, old or young, powerful or powerless; whether you think of yourself as a good person or not; whether you are happy with the way your life is or completely fed up – Jesus came into the world as a vulnerable infant for you. And he would still have done it if you were the only one on earth who needed him.

I guess I'm not alone in struggling sometimes in getting my head around the fact that Jesus loves me just as I am today. Not some idealised view I have of how I would like to be. Jesus loves the real me. The message of the visits from the shepherds and the wise men, is that Jesus came for all. With your good bits and your flaws, he came for you.

In the days ahead whether you are basking in the warm glow of having done a good turn for your neighbour or feeling guilty because you were selfish about something: whether you are anxious about the future or fed up and grumpy because of ongoing restrictions; remember that Jesus came for you – just as you are right now.

What does he ask in return?

I can do no better than to quote the famous Christmas carol.

What can I give him, poor as I am.

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.

If I were a wise man, I would do my part.

Yet what can I give him.

Give my heart.

Jonathan