

We have heard one of the best known passages of the Gospels read to us, and you may be thinking that I've lost the place because the story of the wise men belongs in advent. Every nativity play has the shepherds and the three wise men, or wise persons as they have to be today, coming to visit the baby Jesus in the manger. This is a mistake as there is no mention of the wise men, or Magi to give the their proper name, visiting the manger. If we read Matthew chapter two correctly, we will see that it is appropriate to read this scripture a few weeks after Jesus' birth. This morning I want to look at the myths surrounding the story of the three kings, and hopefully we will end up better informed.

Chapter two of Matthew's gospel tells of the coming of the Magi to worship the infant Christ. This story only appears in Matthew and there are no mention of shepherds, for they only appear in Luke. Mark's gospel doesn't give any mention of Jesus' birth and John's gospel has Jesus with God before the creation of the universe. Why has Matthew told of the Magi when other Gospel writers have not? ***The first part of our investigation into the Magi, is to ask who were they?*** The Magi were not kings, they were priests and learned men who lived among the Babylonians, and as Babylon which is in modern Iraq is east of Israel, this explains why they came from the east. The Magi were adept at secret learning and were said to be able to interpret dreams, they had knowledge of astronomy and ancient astrology. They belonged to a tribe called Chaldeans which are mentioned in the Old Testament, particularly in Daniel. The Chaldeans had their own beliefs and were not Jews, which makes their visit to worship Jesus all the more remarkable.

What is the source of Matthew's story of the Magi? If we read the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we will note that they are very similar; these three books are known as the synoptic Gospels. The synoptic gospels were written within ten years of each other, with Mark's gospel being written around 65AD.

Matthew and Luke used Mark's work as a template, and added other stories of Jesus. They wrote their gospels around 75AD. John's gospel is different and is inspired by the Holy Spirit in a more obvious way than the other gospels, and it's thought that John's writing dates from around 95AD. Each of the gospel writers used written and verbal accounts of Jesus' life, which explains why each gospel is slightly different. They were also writing to different audiences, with Luke writing reflecting a preference for the poor, while Matthew used his gospel to try and convince Jews that they didn't have to slavishly follow the Hebrew law because Jesus had freed them from the law. This explains why Luke wrote of poor shepherds while Matthew includes the Magi who weren't Jewish, and yet came to worship the King of the Jews.

*Is Matthew's story of the Magi, reliable history or myth?* Did Matthew simply make up this story to make his point to his Jewish readership? Biblical scholars have differed on the accuracy of the Magi's story. The Magi were non Jewish foreigners yet they were travelling to worship the new born King. This can be interpreted as a sign of things to come. This could be a sign that Jesus would be rejected by His own people, the Jews. Other scholars have argued that Matthew simply exchanges Luke's poor shepherds for wealthy wise man to give balance. But this doesn't make sense because the shepherds visited a new born Jesus in the stable.

Matthew records that *after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem during the time of King Herod, they followed a star who led them to Bethlehem, and on entering the house, they saw the child.* There is no mention of a stable or even a baby, but the Magi visited Jesus the child in a house. Again, Biblical scholars have suggested that Jesus would have been between one and two years old at the time of the Magi's visit. Remember that when Herod heard of this new King from the Magi, he jealously ordered that all boys up to the age of two were to be killed. If Jesus was a new born baby, why would Herod order all infants up to the age of two be killed? I think that this suggests that Jesus was an infant rather than a new born baby when the Magi visited Him.

As to the question of whether the story of Magi was simply made up by Matthew, the story doesn't violate historical probability, and if we believe that all scripture is God inspired, then we have to believe the story of the Magi to be true. Matthew was writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century when an expectation of a Messiah coming to liberate the Jews was high. This was a time when people expected a world redeemer, a Messiah to come. There is an argument to say that Matthew's story was written simply to fulfil OT prophecies that are found in Isaiah and Micah concerning a coming Messiah. But there is no mention of Magi in these prophecies so I think the story of visiting Magi is true, and symbolic at the same time. *The homage of the Magi from the east, points to Jesus as being King of the whole world, and not just Israel alone.*

Another myth that needs to be dealt with is the idea that there were three wise men. Matthew doesn't say there were three, or what the number was. The notion that there were comes from the number of gifts presented to Christ. The three gifts were significant: Gold pointed to Christ's royal birth. Frankincense to Jesus' divinity and Myrrh was used to embalm bodies, which signified the coming death of Jesus on the cross. So now that I have completely ruined every nativity play you will see from here on in, what can we take from the story of the Magi?

There are two points for us to consider: *The first point of the story is that the Magi recognized that Jesus was, and is the Saviour of the World.* The Magi were outsiders at the time of Jesus' birth and infancy. They were foreigners and non-Jews and yet they travelled a great distance to worship the infant King. This fact was not lost on Matthew and he made the point that the outsiders worshipped the Messiah when His own people did not. Does this speak to us? Who are the outsiders in our community; the person caught up in addiction, the rough sleeper, the teenager in the hoodie, the refugee? Do we only welcome folk who are the same as us, or do we welcome everyone? We've moved our Oasis Café down to Thorntree Hall and in doing so, we have followed a Biblical model of mission that is found in the nativity story.

The reason we've moved the café to Thorntree Hall is to try and reach people who don't know Jesus, and who wouldn't come to church and need to be saved. It could be argued that the place to come and encounter Jesus is in the church, then think about the nativity story. God could have had His Son born in a temple, or in the house of priest or religious person. But think about the story: Where did the shepherd and the Magi come to worship Christ? They came to worship Him where he was, in a cowshed and a small house. Maybe this is where God is calling us to be this year, where the outsider is, and if we are Christians then the outsider is someone who isn't a Christian. We don't find many outsiders in the church. We find outsiders in the workplace, at school gates and in our Main Street. Our worship of Jesus cannot be defined or contained to our singing praise songs or church attendance. Our worship has to be defined by how we live and our attitude to being inclusive, and actively sharing our faith.

*The second point of the story of the Magi is their gifts.* I have to say that if I had been Mary or Joseph, I may have asked the Magi if they had brought gift receipts! There gifts were pretty useless to an infant, although Mary and Joseph could have sold the Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh and made some money. These gifts were symbols of Jesus' Kingship: Gold pointing to Christ's royal birth. Frankincense to Jesus' divinity and Myrrh signifying Jesus' death on the cross. I don't know how much time you spend thinking about the gifts you are buying people, but I usually spend twice as long thinking as I do shopping because I want to buy people something I know they will appreciate. Whether I get this right is another question, but I try.

But I rarely think of what I will give Jesus, and after all it is His birthday we are celebrating. What can I get for Jesus? I am sure we have all faced the embarrassment of receiving a present from someone we have forgotten to buy for. The reason for Jesus' birth was so He could bring us forgiveness and salvation, and He brought this gift into reality through His death and resurrection at Easter. As I said in the run up to Christmas, the gift of eternal life is the most precious of all gift because its priceless.

Well, that's not strictly true because it cost Jesus His life, although we could never buy our salvation. So when we consider what we can give Jesus in return, there is only one answer, our lives. We can give Christ the present of our lives and the way we live from day to day.

**Conclusion:** The Magi came in expectation of worshipping the King of Kings. Can I suggest that as we start this new year that offer our hearts and minds, and that we live with expectation of meeting and experiencing this same King, our Lord Jesus Christ. And this year, may we consider sharing our experience and hope with others who at the moment in time, are still outsiders?

Lets pray:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for this inspiring story of the Magi,  
that You revealed in Your Gospel.

We proclaim in our hearts and minds that this story is credible,  
and we know this to be true because of our experience of You.

Once again, we proclaim You as our Lord and Saviour

and ask that you give us to courage and opportunity to share Your greatness with others.

In Jesus name: ***Amen***

(1662 words)