

The Visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12)

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Have you ever looked up at the stars in the night sky and been overwhelmed with how many there are? Your eyes don't know which ones to focus on.

I think that is what it is like at Christmas time ~ so many lights, you find it hard to focus on just one. And this is a problem, because at Christmas time, we are in danger of losing sight of the true star, the true light of Christmas ~ Jesus. (David Elvery, 2009, sermoncentral)



Today, we come to the end of the Christmas season, a season that began the last Sunday of November with Advent, its theme of preparedness, of light overcoming the darkness, and it concludes with both darkness and light. Jesus's birth is the coming of light into the darkness, but the darkness of the forces against him, such as Herod's plot to kill him, seeks to extinguish the light.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew is the story of the Magi coming to worship at the feet of Jesus. Is this a true story based on historical fact, or is it, as many Bible scholars believe, a story in the category called *midrash* ~ a Jewish tale configured to fulfill an Old Testament prophecy or comment on a passage of Scripture. Many New Testament scholars dismiss the story of the Wise Men as a pious tale invented long after Jesus' birth by the early Christians who wanted to make the birth of the Son of God more special. Some scholars, like Marcus Borg, believe that the story of the Magi is simply a delightful parable which teaches us the lesson that to find the truth we must go on a long journey with guidance from above. (Fr. Dwight Longenecker, *Aleteia*, December 12, 2017)

Is Jesus light shining in the darkness? Yes. Do the Herods of this world seek to extinguish this light? Yes. Does Jesus still shine in the darkness? Yes.

I love this story, and there are two ways to tell it, one shaped for the innocent hearts and minds of our children, and one better suited to adults with its themes of darkness and light. I think we would rather remember our childhood story.

So, before I get into the darker theme of today's Gospel

A family was driving into town for a family Christmas get-together.

As they passed by the Anglican Church there was a manger scene in the yard. The youngest boy asked his mother, "What's that?" She replied, "That's the Holy family ~ Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, lying in the manger."

A few blocks further on they passed the United Church, where a scene was depicting the journey of the Wise Men. "Who are they?" the young boy asked.

His mother replied, "Those are the Wise Men, who are looking for the Baby Jesus."

"Well, they're not all that wise," the young boy replied. "They won't find him there; he's down the street at that other church." (adapted from *Rise Up And Follow The Star* by J Jeffrey Smead, January 2013, sermoncentral)

The story Matthew tells has few details, but the details we have come to accept were added in the first three centuries of the Church.

The writers at that time were similar to New Age believers today. They were enchanted by magic, esoteric theories and the occult, and they wrote expanded accounts of the birth of Jesus that highlighted the miraculous element and the exotic origins of the Wise Men. Very little of the version we know of the wise men is in Matthew's Gospel. He simply writes, "*Wise men came from the East.*" (v 2) They saw his star. They came to the court of Herod the Great. They brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And, so for years, we have had a few misconceptions about the Magi. Of all the things which are misunderstood, we can list how many there were and the timing of their visit as possibly the top two.

If we ask the question, "*How many wise men were they?*" most people would answer, without thinking, "*three.*" Millions of Christmas cards show three kings presenting gifts to a tiny child in a manger. We sing the carol, "*We Three Kings of Orient Are.*" But we really don't know how many there were. There could have been more or less.

But the three have been named: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, and, no doubt, the reason why we think there were three is because of their three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We are not told that they were kings. Their name “*magi*” means “*wise men*” in English. The singular is *magus*, a word from which we get “*magician*.”

But they were not magicians in the modern sense of the word. Rather, they were a kind of religious figure: magi had wisdom not known by ordinary people. No doubt some were astrologers in the sense that they paid attention to “*signs in the heavens*.”

Matthew says they came “*from the East*” and what mattered to him was that they were Gentiles from “*the nations*” who came to worship the Jewish Messiah, kneeling before him, paying him homage, and bearing gifts. (Borg & Crossan, *The First Christmas*, pp 182-184)

Jewish traditions also speak of temple priests who had gone into exile in Arabia around six hundred years before Christ was born awaiting a chance to return, so it is possible that the Magi came from these priestly groups. (Christmas: *The Original Story* by Margaret Barker, London: Continuum, 2008)

If so, their three gifts could not have been more perfectly suitable ~ gifts given by priests to their new High Priest. (John W. Welch, *New Testament Commentary, Why Did the Wise Men Give Gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh?*)

The next misunderstanding is the timing of their trip. For those of us who have produced and directed Christmas pageants, we have brought the wise men to the manger in our musical productions until people believe that the wise men came to the manger in Bethlehem.

But the language of the Gospel indicates that Jesus was a “*young child*.” The star followed Jesus and came to rest OVER the place where the child was. (v 9)

Matthew imagines a large company of travelers on a long and dangerous road. So a large caravan would be safer and far more practical than three men traveling by themselves.

In view of their long journey and of Herod’s command that all children under two years of age be killed, it is more likely that they arrived when the infant Jesus had already become a young child

The Magi knew on that night in Bethlehem that something had changed, that a light emerged that could not, should not be ignored, and so they followed, without question, despite tremendous obstacles and dangers. So we don’t know much about the Magi, and I think that’s the point because it all focuses on Christ. Christ was the important king in this story.

We know more about the gifts they brought, and they tell a story in and of themselves.

It is easy to see why gold was an appropriate gift for Jesus. Gold was the metal of kings. When gold was presented to Jesus, it acknowledged his right to rule.

Frankincense was used in worship. It was mixed with the oil that was used to anoint the priests of Israel and was believed to represent Christ’s role as priest. The oil provided fragrance for the Temple, and its sweet billowing smoke was thought to carry prayers up to heaven.

Myrrh was another resin and used for preparing the dead for burial.

By any human measure it would be odd, if not offensive, to present to the infant Jesus a spice used for embalming.

But as theologian J.M. Boice states in his Advent article, *Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, it was not offensive in this case, nor was it odd. It was a gift of faith. Myrrh was believed to foreshadow Christ’s death. But more than that, myrrh was known as the “*dew of resurrection*.” (J.M. Boice, December 7th, 2010, crossway.org)

As I stated earlier, I love this story, and we adults need to hear it again, in part because of the mystery these exotic magi introduce into the story, and in part because of the beauty and fittingness of their gifts.

But the adult version of Matthew’s story quickly moves from adoration to the darker world of King Herod.

The Magi first came to Herod and asked, “*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*” This was not an innocent question. In Herod’s mind, there was no king of the Jews except him, and certainly no child was

going to take his place. Even asking such a question was an act of political treason, but Herod was curious and he was a cruel, ruthless, oppressive and paranoid ruler.

When the promise that the world would be turned upside down by a mere child, the powerful Herod only saw a threat to be eliminated; he secretly called in the wise men and told them to find the child so that he, too, could pay him homage. (v8)

The Magi didn't respond with questions or doubt or wonder if the star took them to the wrong neighbourhood, wrong house, the wrong child. They didn't wonder, "Did we take a wrong turn?" or argue with each other, "You should have asked the star for directions!" Instead, the Bible says they headed to Bethlehem to find the Messiah, and when they found him, they were overwhelmed with joy, knelt down, worshipped, and presented gifts.

Afterwards, the Magi set out on their return journey. But they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they returned home by another road. (v 12)

The story of the Magi is a story of the journey of life, of guidance on the way, of delight in finding faith and God, of the intrigue of a greedy and jealous king, and of the good beating the bad. We like the end of the story when the wise men outwit Herod. (*sacredheartmessenger, Fr. Donal Neary*)

The star started the Magi on the journey and then guided them to the end, just like the light of faith in God's promise to guide us through life, through good times and bad times.

Everything about our faith is a part of the celebration of Epiphany. Literally it means "*revealing*," and Epiphany is about unveiling what Advent promises in the words of Isaiah in our first reading this morning: "*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*" (*Isaiah 60:1*) (*Light in Darkness by Alan Brehm, 2013, The Waking Dreamer*)

So as the New Year begins, in these short, cold days of January, may we remind ourselves that in Jesus a light has dawned that will never go out ~ a light of faith, and hope, and joy that shines for all of us. May we all follow the star.

Amen

Addendum: Today's Choir Anthem (an annual tradition)

A New Year Carol by Benjamin Britten

A New Year Carol is a British folk song originating in Wales, and it is also known as Levy Dew. This carol was traditionally sung at New Year and is associated with New Year customs, not Christmas.

*1 Here we bring new water from the well so clear,
For to worship God with, this happy New Year.*

*Chorus (after each verse):
Sing levy-dew, sing levy-dew, the water and the wine,
The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine.*

*2 Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her toe;
Open you the West Door and turn the Old Year go.*

*3 Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her chin;
Open you the East Door and let the New Year in.*

Source: fridayafternoonsmusic.co.uk

The song celebrates the New Year using a combination of folk stories and religious ideas:

Verse 1 "Here we bring new water from the well so clear, For to worship God with this happy New Year." This verse tells us of a Welsh custom: children would collect water from a well to sprinkle on the faces of passers-by. While singing the carol they would also beg for food or money. Washing everything at the end of the old year was a tradition many people took part in: like this they would purify the house and welcome in the new year.

The chorus: "Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine; The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine."

"Levy" is an old English word for lady. "Levy dew" comes from the french "*Levez à Dieu*", raise to God. The chorus is about Holy Communion: "*the water and the wine*". "*The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine*" refer to the golden strings of the harp and the trumpets of heaven.

Verses 2 and 3 describe letting go of the old year and bringing in the new. "*Sing reign of Fair Maid*" refers to folk mythology and golden maidens who represent the rising and setting of the sun, and therefore the turning of seasons and years.

About the song:

This song was written for children to sing in the 1930s.

In 1934 Benjamin Britten wrote a series of 12 songs for the school in Wales where his brother was a teacher. These songs, called *Friday Afternoons* (that was when pupils had their singing practice), started a long process of writing music for schools and Britten's lifelong interest in music for young people and in music education. Britten set to music text by many different poets and authors. The music always illustrates beautifully the mood of the text. All the songs are accompanied by the piano. A New Year Carol is one of the *Friday Afternoons* songs. The text is a traditional folk song and was included by Walter de la Mare in his anthology of poems for children, *Tom Tiddler's Ground* (1931). In the 1920s and early 30s, children sang mostly nursery rhymes and playground chants, and folk songs with simple accompaniments. When Britten composed these songs, they would have felt very contemporary to the children, just as it does when we sing the latest popular songs at school today.

Source: charanga.com