

Home by another way (Matthew 2.1-12)*Epiphany*

© Neil Millar

I started the sermon last week by noting that liturgical time can be disorientating because it unfolds differently to chronological time (with which we're more familiar). Last Sunday (only days after Christmas) we contemplated an event that occurred when Jesus was 12 years old. And now, a week later, we're at the birth, except that we've switched gospels and are now reading from Matthew instead of Luke. There is a rhyme and reason to it, but it does require some flexibility. Today, in the liturgical calendar, we celebrate the revelation of God's glory to the nations, the feast of Epiphany. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning '*revelation from above*'. In the Orthodox Church it's called 'theophany' – '*revelation of God*'. Either way, this feast marks the end of the Christmas season. Although, to begin, Epiphany was the original date for celebrating the birth of Christ. Then, at the Council of Tours in 567CE, Christmas day and Epiphany were set as separate feasts on December 25 and January 6 respectively. Since then, in the West especially, the emphasis of Epiphany has been on the Visitation of the Magi. This story is only recorded in Matthew, which is why we've switched even though we're in the year of Luke. There, it's all clear!!

So, the Visitation of the Magi. Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor has noted that this story remains incredibly popular '*in terms of snaring the human imagination*', and when I think of all the cards, and carols, and paintings, and poems that relate to it, I think she might be right. Not so long ago, James Taylor wrote a beautiful lilting song about it called *Home by Another Way* (the title of today's sermon). Before that, poets as distinct as

William Butler Yeats and William Carlos Williams wrapped creative words around this scene, as did TS Eliot and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In Longfellow's poem, the Magi are named. Can anyone remember them? (*Melchoir, Caspar, Balthasar*).

In truth, much of what we connect with this story is drawn from tradition, not the text, but this is surely just another sign of how it's captivated imagination. We don't actually know the names of the men, nor how many there were (though three different gifts are mentioned); we don't know how long it took them to travel, or how old Jesus was when they arrived. We're not even sure about that famous star, though there are plausible suggestions for a bright light in the heavens at that time. Kingship is a theme in this story, due mostly to the involvement of Herod, but the men themselves were almost certainly not kings. Matthew describes them as Magi from the East. It's often translated 'wise men', but more accurately the Greek, a plural, means simply a group of astrologers. Magos is the singular, as in Simon the magos, mentioned in the book of Acts (13.6-11).

So, here we are, at the feast of Epiphany, being invited to consider afresh to a story that's captivated generations of people before us. What will it do with us today...? Let's begin recapping what Matthew has written. In the opening verse, he introduces the main characters and locates the action: *'In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, astrologers from the East came to Jerusalem.'* Over the next two verses he builds the plot. These astrologers seek a king whose star they perceive has been rising, and leading in this direction. They enter Jerusalem, where they expect a king to be residing – after all, it is the famous holy city. They do find a king, but he's not who they were expecting. This king is old, and has been around for quite some time. Since 37BCE, Herod had been king of Judea.

Herod was a Jew (by conversion) but was only really there because it suited Rome, where power mostly resided. Herod's 'kingship' was supported by a succession of emperors because he was considered to be the best man to keep this troubled region in hand. As a leader, he was cunning and callous, he brooked no rivals. Indeed, in his increasingly paranoid drive to retain rule later in his life, he had 'removed' even three of his own sons. 'It is better to be Herod's pig than his son', Caesar Augustus once quipped, only partly in jest. Herod took no chances, which is why he's immediately interested (and unsettled) by the visit of the Magi. In response to their inquiry about another king, he confers with the chief priests and scribes who duly produce a quote from the prophet Micah (5.2):

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least important of the rulers of Judah, because out of you is going to come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'

It's ironic, you have to say, that the contrast between Herod's merciless rule and the shepherding care of the Messiah conveyed in this quote could not be starker. And, in a sense, neither could the difference between the responses of the Magi and these religious leaders. The Magi were pagans, outsiders, who had travelled far at great risk to engage this happening. In contrast, Jerusalem's religious leaders, insiders, couldn't be bothered to walk ten k's to Bethlehem to check it out. '*Did they go to greet him? Did they lift a sandal? Not at all*', writes commentator, Michael Green, '*They knew it all, but did nothing. That is a characteristic danger for clergy and scholars in any age*'. And maybe for others as well.

Anyway, back to the story. Herod was mean and ruthless, but not one to do what he can outsource to others. He leaves it to the Magi to do the searching and commissions them to bring news of the child's whereabouts

when they find him. His motives are entirely malevolent but he dresses them deceptively in faux humility – *‘that I may too may go and pay him homage’* (8). The Magi continued to follow the star, and when it stopped at the place where the child was, Matthew says, *‘they were overwhelmed with joy’* (10). I wonder what it was that evoked such feeling? The sense of arriving at last... the presence of the place... a touch of the Spirit. I’m not sure... Maybe all of this ... Whatever it was, Matthew seems keen to communicate that there is something profound about coming close to this child. *‘On entering the house’*, he records, *‘they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage’* (11). Gifts were given, gifts that in the tradition have become highly symbolic, and then, next day, *‘having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod they left for their own country by another road’* (12).

Home by another road. At one level, this is just a practical manoeuvre to avoid Herod and protect this family, but is that all it is – just a comment about a change of route? I sense that Matthew is inferring more here. I mean these astrologers had an overwhelming encounter. An experience like that has ongoing implications. In other words, it wasn’t just that they took a left instead of a right when they departed; for mine, this going home by a different route is a hint that *they* themselves were different! That’s what happens when you encounter glory – it changes you. I’ve already noted the contrast between the Magi and chief priests. The Magi are open and responsive – they *follow* the star. The chief priests knew their scriptures backwards, they knew where the Messiah would come from, but when they hear rumours of that coming, they do nothing. The Magi come close and are changed – they go home by another way. The others stay away and remain the same – they’re going nowhere. They miss the glory and learn nothing.

Last Sunday, I suggested that this new year was an opportunity to reflect on our vocation to grow in wisdom, and that during the season of Epiphany, we'd consider practices that support this growth. Well, today's story is a good place to start, after all, these Magi have been portrayed as 'wise' men! What was it that made them wise? Well, Matthew offers some clues. First, they **attended**. They paid close attention to their world – in their case, the heavens. Because they had a sense of how things were typically, they also noticed when something different was happening. Second, they **explored**. When they did notice a change, they checked it out. When they detected that star rising, they got up and followed it. And, third, they **responded**. In other words, they let what they discovered affect them, let it change their way of seeing and being in the world.

Some years ago, the famous Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey articulated three '*moral dispositions*' for learning – the kind of learning that makes us wise and not just knowledgeable: '*wholeheartedness, open-mindedness and responsibility*'. I see all three in the Magi and none in Herod or in the chief priests and scribes.

So, three practices for growing in wisdom??

1. Practice wholehearted attention to what's going on in and around us
2. Practice open-minded exploration of what's being revealed – practice coming close with humility and reverence.
3. Practice being responsive – letting what we discover change us, and being responsible – going '*home by another way*'.

References

Dewey, J (1933) *How we Think*, Regnery, Chicago, IL.

Green, M (2000) *The Message of Matthew*, IVP, Leister.

Taylor, BB (1999) *Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge,