

I well remember at this season of Epiphany as a smallish choirboy, angelic of course, singing “We three kings of Orient are, two in a taxi, one in a car...”, all the while giggling and thinking how original and clever we were. In fact, that is probably as close to the biblical information as the today’s popular understanding of the event is. The account we have just heard is peculiar to Matthew’s Gospel, and precedes the alarming account of the slaughter of the small children and the escape of the holy family to Egypt. In the popular view of the incident, three kings from somewhere east of Bethlehem travel in the coldest weather following a star which moved about in the sky and stopped in different places, sometimes with disastrous results. (T S Eliot’s poem tells us ‘A cold coming we had of it, Just the worst time of the year, The very dead of winter.’), When they eventually arrived, they found the holy baby and gave him the three significant gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their names have even entered into the tradition, Melchior, Balthazar and Caspar and one of them seems to be depicted as a very black Nubian.

These people are often glossed over, but they are of fundamental importance; this event cements Christianity as a religion for all, not just the chosen race of the Israelites, or the descendants of Judah and their religion of Judaism.

Traditional nativity scenes depict three "kings" visiting the infant Jesus in a manger on the night of his birth, along with shepherds and angels, but this should be understood as an artistic convention allowing the two separate scenes of Luke’s account of the of the shepherds and the later Adoration of the Magi to be combined for convenience. The account in Matthew simply presents the visit of the Magi at an unspecified moment after Christ's birth in which an unnumbered party of unnamed "wise men" (or μάγοι, magoi, where we get the word ‘Magic’ from) visits him in a house (οἰκίαν, oikian), not a stable, with only his mother being mentioned as present. (Not that a stable is specifically mentioned in Luke, either – nor is an inn keeper). These wise men could have arrived up to two years later, given the ages of the children that Herod ordered killed. Here in St Mary’s we could even be contributing a little piece of interpretative history ourselves; in the days between Christmas and Epiphany, the figurines of the Wise Men (three ‘Kings’ in our case, are travelling towards the crib on a nave windowsill but this means that they are travelling from the West in an Easterly direction, quite the opposite of the actual events. Perhaps they should be on the Chancel windowsill!

So, what do we know, or can at least deduce from the actual text? As I have said how many wise men there were is not specified in Matthew, simply that they brought three gifts, but their names, whilst perhaps not known to Matthew emerge quite early in the Christian era apparently being derived from a Greek manuscript probably composed in Alexandria around 500AD, supported by another Greek document from the 8th century of presumed Irish origin, continuing the tradition of three kings and their names.

Other authorities assert that, according to Western church tradition, Balthasar is often represented as a king of Arabia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of

India. In contrast, many Syrian Christians name the Magi Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas. These names have a far greater likelihood of being originally Persian, though that does not, of course, guarantee their authenticity. In the Eastern churches, Ethiopian Christianity, for instance, has Hor, Karsudan, and Basanater, while the Armenians have Kagpha, Badadakharida and Badadilma. Many Chinese Christians believe that one of the magi came from China. So perhaps it's not too surprising that Matthew omits their names, but for him, the names are not as important as the significance of their actions.

We are also told in Matthew that they followed a star. There is some room for personal interpretation here, usually given as a straight choice between astronomy and astrology. Did the wise men follow a physical star which moved ahead of them in the sky, stopping in the wrong place before eventually finding the baby Jesus and his mother, or were they the Mystic Megs of their day, interpreting the stars and foreseeing what will happen?

We are very sceptical about modern day horoscopes, even if we are unable to resist them when we come across them in the dentist's waiting room. I remember once, a long time ago, going on to my brother's horoscope (after reading mine) when he was in the Navy and had just sailed, homeward bound from Australia – "Only local travel" it said. (I suppose, given how far away the stars are, Australia could be classed as 'local').

Of course, it's not that simple; Astronomy is the oldest of the natural sciences, dating back to antiquity, with its origins in the religious, mythological, cosmological, calendrical, and astrological beliefs and practices of prehistory. Vestiges of these are still found in modern star-gazing, a practice long interwoven with public and governmental astronomy, and not disentangled from it until a few centuries ago, even then not completely. Adolph Hitler, the ruler of Germany's third Reich, consulted astrologers to assist his decisions (luckily).

So the Wise Men were both astrologers and astronomers, but kings or rulers they were not. No earthly king would ever have travelled such a distance without a huge entourage simply to visit a baby, even a royal one. No; these people were solely concerned with the esoteric, hidden ideas of prophecy, divine interaction and mysticism; their gifts show that. And remember, they were seeking an event that had already happened – the birth of a special baby.

However, some moderately radical commentators offer the view that Matthew, that most Jewish of the Gospel writers and knowing that all these things were foretold, constructed the whole of his birth narrative around the relevant Old Testament texts, of which he uses six; all of them are of dubious relevance and one does not exist at all!

Perhaps the most difficult parts of this narrative are the actions of Herod the Great. Having been consulted by the Wise Men it states that King Herod was 'frightened' and 'all Jerusalem with him'. I can see why Herod would be troubled, even though it

was not in his character, but why all Jerusalem? They should, and would have been, jumping for joy! But when Herod sent the wise men off to find this new-born King of the Jews, he did not go with them, or send some of his people with them, or have them followed or even go to Bethlehem independently. He just sat and waited, eventually being elbowed into a terrifying massacre of tiny children. Herod was easily capable of such a dastardly act. His second oldest son put about a rumour that his older brother was plotting to overthrow his father, so father, Herod, had his son and heir executed. Upon discovering that the now oldest son and heir had planned his brother's downfall, he had him executed too. He also executed his wife Mariamne, previously having banished his first wife, Doris and their son, Antipater. A truly nasty piece of work. Josephus, the Jewish historian tells us this and more, but not a word about the slaughter of the children.

But Matthew was not concerned with earthly kings in this account. He is concerned with the Epiphany. The word is from Koine Greek ἐπιφάνεια, epiphaneia, meaning showing beyond or manifestation. The ancient patriarchal promise of the future Messiah is not simply for the chosen race, but for the whole of humanity; the infant saviour is being manifested to foreign scholars who can see him for what he is and will be. Salvation for all has arrived.

But for all that, we too experience something of the 'very dead of winter' as T S Eliot has it, in our personal journey: sadness, discouragement, the tragedies of life, the pain of bereavement, the fear and loneliness of old age, the thought of our failures, the things we regret, perhaps terrible mistakes that we have made, worries about the past and worries about the future; problems that remain unresolved and perhaps can never be resolved; perhaps the bitter agony of illness and death that awaits us, or even worse, the pain and bewilderment of seeing a loved one suffer; the dread of separation; and sometimes we wonder what's the point of it all. "A cold coming we had of it", indeed. And a harder time still we shall have of it, no doubt. That's life.

But in our lives, Christians live in faith, and faith is always driven by promise and hope; and faith tells us that the star is there, and is leading us to somewhere truly spectacular, Christ himself, who makes sense of it all and makes it all infinitely worthwhile.