

The Visit of the Wise Men

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Epiphany, 7th January 2024 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

Genesis 1:1-5; Matthew 2:1-12

There is no story in either the Old or the New Testament which has been so embellished as that of the Coming of the Wise Men: first of all there's nothing to say that there were three of them - that's an assumption based on the three gifts; then the wise men become quite early on, kings - and that's probably a reference back to Isaiah 60, which talks about the restoration of Jerusalem and says, 'Kings shall come to the brightness of your rising'; and then we get names for the kings - Caspar, Melchior and Baltazar; and then later still, there is an idea that the three kings represent the three great ethnic types in the world - Caucasian, African and Asian; and then all sorts of legends and traditions are built up around them - there's the legend of the fourth king who gets lost on the way and is still said to be wandering the earth looking for the Christ child - in some churches people mark their doorposts with chalk and the date of epiphany and that is supposed to be a sign that should the wise men pass that way, they would be welcome to call; and finally, the supposed relics of the three kings are held in Cologne Cathedral.

But if you strip away all those wonderful accretions that have made the story so rich and so much a subject of art, you come back to two things. Two things which also have things in common with the other birth story in Luke of the shepherds.

And the first theme is that of light - the wise men are guided by a star. They probably were a mix of astronomers and astrologers and they follow the star first of all to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. And, of course, light is absolutely central - it's the first thing to be created, as we heard in the first lesson this morning. And I was listening yesterday morning to a review of all possible recordings of Haydn's great oratorio, *The Creation*: there is the most wonderful moment when the choir very quietly sings, 'And God said, "let there be light", and there was light.' And there's this mighty crash for the whole orchestra, the moment when light first appears. And of course, Christ himself is known as the Light of the World, the light that shines in the darkness and that darkness cannot put out. And that theme of light is one which goes right through the gospel. And indeed, there is an echo of the story of the star and the coming of the wise men in Luke's account, which we now call *The Presentation of Christ in the temple*. Simeon, who says that Christ is a "Light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people, Israel." So that's one theme which is so dominant in this story.

And the second is all about power and about where God reveals himself. And there again, there's a link between the shepherds and the wise men, because they're not obvious people, to have this revelation of the birth of Christ revealed to them. They're utterly different. The shepherds are local to Bethlehem, just a few fields away; the wise men travel a great distance to find the Christ Child. But both are unexpected. Shepherds were not

honoured figures much in Biblical times: because of the work that they did and the fact that they were out in the field it was very difficult for shepherds to remain ritually pure in Jewish terms. So it's a real surprise that it's them who get the message from the angels and make that first visit to the manger. And the wise men are foreigners, they're not Jewish - they are from outside the traditional people of God.

And the other aspect of power in the story of Epiphany is that of Herod - well known to have been a savage tyrant, he murdered much of his own family to stay on the throne. And we see a theme emerging this early in the story of Christ that will become more and more dominant as we move towards Lent and Holy Week and Easter. And that is that Christ will be opposed - opposed by those who have the power, the traditional seats of power, whether that power is the puppet kings, the Herodian monarchs or the Romans or the high priests or the scribes and the Pharisees. They are the traditional wielders of power, and they are threatened. The first thing that we are told about Herod, funnily enough, is not about his wickedness, but about his fear: Herod was frightened - here was a threat to his power.

And so we see Christ revealed to those who are without power, the shepherds, humble men and the outsiders. And, of course, we then see throughout the gospel that Jesus is called precisely to those kind of people. It is those people to whom he ministers: the sick, the outcast, the sinner, those without conventional power, as opposed to those who have power and who oppose him.

And if we take those two themes of light and power and bring them into our own day, we can see that they are as much relevant and powerful now as they were then. We see a world in which there is so much darkness and yet also always light, the light of Christ. And often, if we follow the media and get our news only from the media, we perhaps neglect the light because it's not good news, it's not newsworthy. But even in the midst of terrible things like Gaza or Ukraine, we see light; we see the light that cannot be put out; we see it in individual acts of heroism; we see it in communities coming together in solidarity.

Those of my generation who have lived in this area all their lives may remember that when Leconfield was still an active RAF station with flying, the two great spires in the area, that of south Dalton and Scarborough, had lights on the top of their spires so that incoming planes at night didn't hit them.

And that is what we are to be: we are to be lights in the world. Sometimes it feels like hard work, but that is our calling: to be individually and as a community, light reflecting the light of Christ, reflecting the light of creation.

And then also we are to exercise power, but not power in the conventional human worldly sense - sadly, the church has sometimes gone down that route to its own cost - but a servant power, the power of service (we sometimes sing that modern hymn, the Servant King - Christ comes to serve, not to be served). And at the washing of the feet of the disciples on Maundy Thursday, he gives them that example as to how the church is to be.

There is much, much abuse of power, and sometimes tragically, it has got into the church itself. But we are to be servants, servants of Christ, servants of the Light.

The wise men come, briefly appear in the story, and then disappear - we hear no more of them. But when T. S. Eliot wrote a very famous poem about the coming of the wise men, he concluded by saying that nothing could ever quite be the same again after that journey.

And once we have encountered Christ in our lives, then neither us, nor our families, nor the world in which we live can ever be quite the same again. It is lit, we are lit, by the light of Christ, and we exercise the power of the crucified and risen Lord in our daily lives.

Reading Texts

Genesis 1:1-5

¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." ' ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.