

Epiphany - Sunday 3 Jan 2010

Iffley

Well, Epiphany again, and the story of the wise men, which of all the stories of Christmas remains the most appealing. It has the best set hymns to my mind, and somehow it always holds people's imaginations.

Looking at our Christmas cards this year a fair smattering of them are really what I would call Epiphany cards, with wise men – including one of three men in Ali Baba costumes, with spiky crowns on their heads, marching across the waterfront..... at St Ives in Cornwall – which is something of an imaginative jump! And another interesting – and actually rather lovely card, that seems to have got into a bit of a muddle: there is a village over which hangs a large star, and trekking across a desert towards it are.....two shepherds! It is lovely to get Christmas cards, but they are often indicators of how far those who design them are from knowing the biblical texts they show. Stars belong to Matthew's gospel and shepherds to Luke's – where stars are not mentioned. And nowhere does Matthew mention Kings and nowhere does he say that there are three of them. But then, the Christmas story of popular imagination, with its ox and ass and innkeeper's wife and three kings who actually get names, long ago left the biblical text behind. These two accounts of the nativity, Matthew's and Luke's are quite different from each other, and were never intended to be woven together in the way we do every Christmas.

Which makes it all the more important to try and understand what it is that Matthew is telling us in this account. Who are the wise men, and why does Matthew put them into his text?

Well, it is entirely possible that a group of like this did visit Jesus in his infancy. From time to time people work out the

possibility of conjunctions of stars that might have been around at about this period – to prove it, as it were. Hailey’s comet is one suggestion. The trouble is that it never quite works out. Hailey’s comet appeared at least twelve years before a possible date for Jesus’ birth. And anyway, stars don’t stop over houses, much as we might like them to. The fact is that no one has ever found any historical justification for this story. And the really interesting thing about it is that, as a story, it has more links into passages of the Hebrew bible than many another Gospel passage – there are at least eight. We need to remember that the Gospels are not history, they don’t pretend to be eyewitness accounts. They are about deep and profound truths, which the writers want to weave into our minds so that we will ponder them and change our lives for the better. A much more interesting question than whether all this happened or not, is what Matthew wants to tell us by putting in this mysterious story, with its strangers from afar who visit the Christ Child in Bethlehem.

And I think the clue to that lies in what this passage has to tell us about wisdom and power. Magi was a term used in the ancient eastern world, not for kings but for people likely to be *advisers* to kings. So Matthew is telling us about people who are of some importance and above all people who are supposed to be wise, to have the sort of understanding that will shape the affairs of this world. But the story he tells us, if you look at the details carefully, is of people who do not appear to be very wise at all. They follow a star, but somehow lose it. They arrive at Herod’s Palace, and know nothing at all about who they are looking for – it is Herod and his advisers who know about Bethlehem and a possible Messiah. And when they leave the Palace it appears that there was no need for them to have been there anyway, because there is the star, brighter than ever, and it takes them to the exact place. And it is evidently now so bright and so obvious you wonder why others don’t see it and follow it too – including Herod’s servants. And

why did these subtle and supposedly learned men – skilled in the affairs of the world - not pick up on Herod’s malign intentions? There is a wonderful carving in a church in France of the three wise men, tucked up in bed, fast asleep, and an angel leaning over them, poking them hard, as if to say “For goodness sake, wake up to what is going on!” They certainly needed a good prodding! Because the consequence of their – no doubt well intentioned – visit to Herod’s court, is the terrible catastrophe of the massacre of the innocents.

Could that be the point of the story? Could it be that we have treated this story with such reverence that we have missed what Matthew actually wants to tell us? He tells us about people who represent the best of human wisdom, who frankly blunder around, whose intentions, which may be good, are hopelessly tangled with power, and end up in disaster for a lot of people – though of course not for themselves. Where have we read of that happening before? It is a familiar enough story. But, unlike Herod, these men bow down low before the Christ child, as if to acknowledge that the best of human understanding is empty before the wisdom of God. Without the gift of God’s grace human understanding has nothing to offer.

And here Matthew is saying something quite radical both for his time – and ours. In the ancient world people always thought that God was on the side of power and wealth. Power and politics still rule our lives – even though we may respect them less. And at a personal level, power, of one sort or another, whether the power of position or personality, beguiles many of us. But...forget it, Matthew is saying, the truth is different. In this story the world – or rather *our view of the world* - is turned upside down. Power and wealth – like all of human life - needs to be laid before God, and reshaped by God. Though Matthew is also warning us that we need sharp eyes to see the greatness of God, whose coming is always the opposite of what

- and how - we might expect. God? In a baby? So this tale becomes a kind of overture – perhaps created by Matthew himself - to a Gospel that is frequently going to develop just those themes. This is the Gospel that gives us the Sermon on the Mount, where it is the poor and the suffering and the meek who inherit the earth, and where Jesus holds up a child as the example of his Kingdom. Where the Kingdom is frequently described as a Banquet, a place where rich and poor alike sit at the same table. And where, at the end, we are told that twelve Galilean fishermen – some of the least valued people in that society – will sit on twelve thrones, and judge the world – and their criterion will be the simplest of things – the sick are visited, a cup of water is given. In those needy people is God, God’s very self, just as God is in the child before whom the wise men bow down.

So, at the start of a new year, that leaves us with some important questions to ponder.

- What does this story say about the values that we hold?
- And (a question to go on and on pondering here) why is it that in God’s Kingdom strength lies in *weakness*?
- What would the world look like if a Mother’s gentleness and a child’s delight in life, and above all the sacredness of the human person, were to be the highest values of all – the qualities we, as it were, bow down to before all others?
- How would our lives be if, before we did anything, we laid our affairs before God, and waited, humbly open to the possibility that there might be a very different way of doing things from the one we would usually choose?

In this world of muddle and mess, that seems to be a very appropriate set of questions.