

The foreshadowing birth narrative in Matthew.

Sermon preached by Jessica Smith, Parish Lay Minister, Feast of the Epiphany 5.1.2014

“Where is he who is born King of the Jews?” Good question! It has been observed that although we don’t know how many stargazers there were on that quest, we do know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that they were men. Had there been women in their party, one of them would have asked for directions much earlier, and they would therefore have arrived on time at the venue. The gifts they brought would have been practical ones of immediate use and benefit to parents with a newborn baby, including a hot meal, and the cave would have been swept and tidied before they left.

The manner in which we might be tempted to put the question asked by those star gazers of the ancient world at this time of year in northern Europe could be one of less than excited anticipation. If the decorations aren’t down yet, they need to come down in the next few hours. Bad luck all year if you don’t - that’s if you subscribe to worldly superstition ... The children are back at school tomorrow. The news is invariably gloomy. The mail coming through the letter box is less likely to contain greeting cards and more likely reminders of what we’ve spent, what we now owe, and, of course, interminable suggestions of how we might spend yet more. As the well known song of the months by Flanders and Swan concludes, “Freezing wet December, then/ Blinking [*or whatever*] January again!”

We’ve had Act 1 in the magical mystery tale of the Lord’s birth. We may have consumed a fair amount of rubbish in the interval, perhaps even before and during the first part of the show. Now begins Act 2 in the amazing revelation of the incarnate God, the enfleshed God, the God-with-us. The act which begins with the arrival of the magi and finishes with the presentation in the temple as the old priest Simeon recognises the light for revelation to the gentiles. The neighbours may have taken down the lights and tinsel on New Year’s Day but they most probably had them up from the beginning of Advent when we were contemplating both the first Act and the final Act yet to come. We’re out of kilter with the world, and so we should be. “*My kingdom is not of this world*”, as the Lord would later say. What we might share with the world, though, on this feast of Epiphany, is the sense of unease. When the crib comes out on Christmas Eve, we are in mind of St Luke’s narrative of the birth of Jesus – angels chorusing the message of peace, shepherds bringing lambs, the newborn child in the manger attended by ox and ass. There is pathos to this narrative, of course, but there is warmth and charm as well.

It’s a short-lived episode, though. The news has spread to the east, too fast for comfort - beyond the bounds of not only Judea but also the vast Roman Empire. These consultant astrologers, able to predict the future, clever and rich as they are, don’t seem to know how dangerous their mission is. They are risking their own lives and those of a vulnerable little family. Matthew’s narrative tells of a joyful encounter between the magi and the Christ child, but it is at the same time fraught with tension and darkness. For neatness sake, we place this group of visitors in the stable, which Matthew doesn’t do. We choose by tradition to maintain the warmth and charm for their journey’s end, but evil is lurking in the background. The whole of Jerusalem knows of their arrival and why. The search is on and those sage yet seemingly naïve men - asking for directions a bit late - have been beguiled by the paranoid and wicked king Herod. *After* their encounter with Jesus, though, *divine* wisdom prevails, and they realise they must take a different route home. Part of their stock-in-trade would have been the interpretation of dreams, and some of their gold will have come from the good money they could earn that way. But having handed over the riches and tools of their trade to the one they recognise as the Infant King, godly wisdom is

the interpreter from now on. Those exotic outsiders, these gentile visitors, are the first converts to Christ.

Their coming looked at this way, of course, is a *foreshadowing*. A foreshadowing of the life, death and resurrection of the little Lord Jesus, peacefully but transiently asleep on the hay before being picked up and taken on the run. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head." The Lord's own words again. A foreshadowing of changed lives touched by the Lord Jesus, of the powers that will plot his death, of Jerusalem where it will be decreed, of Kingship of the whole world. All undoubtedly quite deliberate on Matthew's part, in the way he meticulously presents Jesus to his Jewish readers as the fulfilment of the Old Testament Law and Prophets, as the anointed Messiah. The whole history of the Old Testament flows together in Jesus, from Moses and the Exodus, through the judges and the splendour of the kingdom and the Wisdom of Solomon to the exile and the hope of restoration in Isaiah. Matthew shows us Christians how to read and understand the Old Testament and the meaning behind the questions it poses.

But to return to these astronomer/astrologer men, (for the two sciences were not separate in the ancient world), *their* route to King Jesus came not via scripture but through interpretation of the stars, through studying the night sky, unadulterated by street lamps, (or even floodlit churches ...) Gentiles good and proper. Their belief system would have been in a world interconnected with the heavens, where an important happening on earth would have been reflected in the stars, and conversely that a remarkable movement in the stars meant a remarkable event on earth. That knowledge got them so far, as far as Jerusalem. After that they needed the help of those knowledgeable of the scriptures to get them to Bethlehem, though the moving star went before them and rested over the house where they found the Lord and His mother. And what did they do? They presented prophetic (if impractical) gifts and bowed the knee.

We develop our theology from many sources besides the Bible. One obvious source is from the arts, from paintings in particular. Sorting through those decorations we might perhaps pause and look more closely at the Christmas cards before deciding how to dispose of them. On paintings of the Epiphany, two particular common features can be noted. One is the infant Jesus laying his hand on the visitors to bless them. The other is *them* kissing his feet as they kneel down and worship. A powerful and intimate exchange - foreshadowing again. This is what we shall do in a few weeks time on Good Friday - kiss the feet of the same Jesus on the cross. It's a connection Matthew would surely want us to make, for he was writing, as were all the New Testament writers, in the light of the *ultimately* stupendous events of the death and resurrection. The foreshadowing in the birth narratives is skilfully told so that we might make the connection.

"Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" Good question. King of the Jews was the inscription above the cross. He is raised up, that's where he is. Raised up on the cross, raised up from the tomb, raised up into heaven, reigning over the whole world, drawing all people to him, and here to meet us this day in this Eucharist. O come, let us worship.