

# The Wise Men

*Readings: Isaiah, chapter 60, verses 1-6; Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-12*

After putting up with me for the past 4 years you will neither be surprised or shocked at what I say. Which is just as well. Because on this Sunday after Christmas I want to preach about the story of the Wise men. Traditionally they came with the shepherds to worship the new-born Child.

Problem is that, if they came, they came 2 years after the birth — why else would Herod order the massacre of every child under 2 yrs when killing every child under 6 months would have done the trick. I said "if they came" because I am not at all sure that there is any historical accuracy to this story.

Matthew, who wrote the gospel, was a Jew. And Jewish Rabbis (Teachers) commonly used what is known as "midrash" in their teaching. They took an Old Testament text and wove a story around it in order to bring out its inner meaning and its real significance. Which is what Matt is doing here. He took a text from Isaiah chapter 60 which spoke of Kings coming to the brightness of God's rising and travelled from afar to offer the gifts of gold and frankincense. And, using this text, he wove a wondrous story in order to show its unexpected fulfilment and to reveal the true significance of this Child. Never mind that the story is made up. Jesus did it all the time in His parables. The truth of Jesus' parables and Jewish 'midrash' goes far beyond whether or not they actually happened.

So Matthew employs 'midrash' to reveal the truth about Jesus. And it's an amazing Truth.

Firstly he tells us that Jesus is the Saviour of the world, not just of the Jews. So, following Isaiah, he speaks of Kings or Magi coming to worship the Christ Child. These magi were not Jews. They were foreigners, representative of the Gentile 'nations'. And these non-Jews come to worship at the cradle of the Christ. There is a universalism built into the Jesus story from the very beginning and it comes as no surprise that the last words of Jesus to His disciples were "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations". The problem with Christmas is that it is wrapped up in too much sentimentality and we miss the challenging truth incarnate in this Child. Christ was born to be the Saviour of the world. That's what the story of the Wise men is saying to us. Nor can we ever be content until all the world has this Good News. It is the impetus of the mission of the Church. It is the reason why we should evangelise.

Secondly, the gifts which the Wise Men brought are symbolic of the significance of Jesus.

They brought gold. Traditionally the gift associated with Royalty and in offering gold they were saying; "You are our King". The rest of the gospel spells out the nature of Jesus' kingship. Not a dictatorial despot as were other Eastern kings. Not a king who enforces obedience. But a king who appeals and invites our response and respects our refusal to obey.

They brought frankincense. Traditionally the gift associated with a Priest and used in worship. In offering this gift they were saying "You are our priest". And the priest functioned as a 'middleman' between God and men. A go-between person. An amazing insight. God comes to us in Jesus. We come to God through Jesus.

And they offered myrrh. Matthew added this gift to Isaiah's text because it added a dimension Isaiah never envisaged. Myrrh was an ointment used to embalm the dead. In offering this gift they were saying "You are born to die" and it is a pre-figuring of the suffering and death of Jesus. His suffering was redemptive. It was 'for us and our salvation' as the Creed says.

Thirdly, Matthew tells us that Herod, representative of the Jewish people was minded to do away with the Child. Here he is telling us what St John in his gospel put so memorably. "He came to his own people and his own people received him not." So it was in Jesus' life-time. Jesus' most

implacable enemies were the religious authorities and it was the religious leaders who aped Herod and demanded his death. So it was in the earliest years of the Church's expansion. St Paul always took the message of Jesus to the Jews in the synagogue first. Only when they rejected him did he go out into the market place to proclaim the Good News.

Whether this story of the Wise Men is historical fact or 'midrash' makes absolutely no difference to its truth. It proclaims the gospel. For Christ is the Saviour of the world. He is our King and our response is to pledge our obedience. He is our Priest, in Him we encounter God and through Him we come to God. He laid down His life and died in order that God could justifiably offer us a free forgiveness. That is the glory of the Christ-Child. And the tragedy is that still, today, He comes to us and we will not receive Him.

Charles Wesley understood Matthews story perfectly and penned a hymn:

"Thy undistinguishing regard  
was cast on Adam's fallen race;  
For ALL Thou has in Christ prepared  
Sufficient, sovereign, saving grace."