

3rd January 2021 – Epiphany – Chris’s Sermon

Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany)

“...they set out; and there ahead of them went the star that they had seen, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy...”

Well, here we are again, gathered together for another Epiphany Sunday the day when we remember and celebrate the story of the three wise men – who followed a bright star in the east (in Persia), all the way to Bethlehem in the west – the birthplace of our Lord.

According to our reading, three wise men see a sign of God’s presence in the sky – in the East and follow that sign all the way into the west. They have an epiphany – a moment of recognition and clarity that changes them – the star was their inspiration and their guide.

But, I wonder, did it really happen, as it’s described in scripture? At some point in history, did a star really guide three wise men – three ancient mystics (Gnostics) – followers of Zoroaster? Or, is the story a beautifully crafted metaphor for faith – a story about the pilgrim’s journey – a story intended to offer guidance to the faithful (inspiration).

Obviously, I have my own beliefs, but today I’d like to talk about both possibilities – and leave the conclusions to you.

Firstly, in favour of the star as a historical event. It’s been argued many times that there was some sort of astrological sign (or phenomena) that may have led the magi. You may be surprised to learn that recorded sightings of Haley’s Comet date all the way back to the third century (in Europe and China) – but the dates don’t match. (Hayley’s Comet visits every 77 years – with the closest visit falling around 12 BC – which is too early.)

A couple of years ago, I remember reading an article by an astronomer (Michael Molner), who writes for Australian Sky and Telescope. He argued that the star of Bethlehem could have been the morning star – which is in fact the planet Jupiter – rising 12 degrees ahead of the sun (as part of the constellation Aries – in April). And, rising ahead of the sun, he argues that the morning star accounts for Matthew’s description of the star rising in the East. And, there were evidently a number of roman era astrologers, who spoke of a royal star - that would appear in the sky to herald the birth of royalty.

Molner quotes one roman astrologer who lived in 433 AD – who spoke of the birth of “...an especially divine and immortal person - who is exalted in Aries, accompanied by the planets Saturn and Jupiter, with the moon moving towards Jupiter...”

Well, that’s pretty specific. According to Molner, this particular alignment of planets matches the conditions of the 17th of April, in the year 6 BC.

Most modern-day theologians date the birth of Jesus to between 6 and 4 BC. So yes, some have argued that there was a sign (a phenomenon) that led those three wise men to the birthplace of Jesus. (My dad would be pleased – as his birthday is also the 17th of April.)

But, there’s another possibility as well. I think there’s a lot of evidence pointing to the possibility that Matthew’s star was a metaphor for faith – a story about a pilgrimage of faith – written to inspire and guide the faithful.

As a Jewish Christian, Matthew was also a student of the teachings of Judaism – he knew the stories of his people. And, it can't be overlooked that there are some undeniable similarities between the Herod of Matthew's Gospel and the Pharaoh that's described in Exodus. The parallels are undeniable. While Herod searches for the baby Jesus and kills the male children of Bethlehem, Pharaoh searches for the baby Moses and kills the male children of the Israelites. (Some could argue that Moses and Jesus both seemed to share the same calling – both appointed by God to lead the people out of slavery.)

And, the similarities continue. The father of Jesus (according to Matthew and Luke), is Joseph. But, Joseph also shares his name with Joseph, the son of Jacob – one of twelve brothers (representing the twelve tribes of Israel). Both Josephs are called to make a journey into Egypt - in their dreams (to fulfill God's will).

And, of course, we also have the story of the Magi – who travel to Bethlehem from Persia. The story of the three wise men seems very similar to the story concerning Balaam – (who was also a magi) - called to make a journey of faith from the east into the west (guided by a bright new star that he'd seen rising out of Jacob). In the book of numbers (22-24), we're told that king Balak of Moab was afraid of the Israelites, who were being led by Moses out of Egypt. He called the magi Balaam to curse Israel. But, filled with the wisdom of a prophet, he travelled to Israel to speak of their future greatness – he also travelled with two assistants (so, three wise men made the journey).

Yes, it sounds very familiar – the book of numbers describing a pilgrimage made by three wise men – sent by a wicked king to curse the people. But, instead they make the journey to honour Israel's future greatness. (And, all the while, led by a star.)

So, I guess we each must choose the explanation that seems to fit our understanding. Some, may well want to affirm that there was some sort of historical event – a sign that led the wise men to Bethlehem. And, some may well argue that Matthew's star is a symbol of his faith and his Jewish heritage – a faith that's often honoured by the pagans of the world and dishonoured by the so-called faithful.

As I said at the beginning, I'll leave it to you to choose which explanation works best for you. In the end, I don't think it really matters very much – both explanations affirm the power of the star – as a sign of God's love (and the hope that we carry in our hearts, as we follow – as we make our journey of faith).

Both explanations affirm that the star point to the birthplace of our Lord (and our invitation to participate in the story). And surely, beyond all debate and speculation, today we are united by our common recognition of the signs that lead us forward, as we too search for God – a God who comes to us – a God wrapped in human flesh – a God what we see in the faces of those around us and the opportunities for service and growth that lead us forward (the wisdom and inspiration that moves us and shapes us).

In the words of our reading, "...they set out; and there ahead of them went the star that they had seen, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were filled with joy..."

May we too be filled with the wisdom of the Magi – inspired and filled with hope, as we make our pilgrimage of faith.

The Lord be with you.