

On the Second Sunday of Advent we concern ourselves with wise men and watching shepherds. The wise men or magi star in the Gospel according to St Matthew and the watching shepherds are from that of St Luke. Matthew's and Luke's stories about the incidents surrounding the birth of Jesus are very different and it would be a misguided reader who would try to streamline them into a single coherent narrative. It can't be done. We must live with the contradictions and, rather than blame our gospel-makers for not conforming to our tidy minds, try to grasp how and why each has an individual voice, and understand that each presents a picture of Jesus and his disciples which meets the concerns of the church communities for which each wrote. Gospels are in-house documents and were written to encourage and challenge a particular local church for which each was written. We must be content to read each Gospel on its own terms and realize that Gospels were not written with us in mind.

What we can say is that the wise men and the shepherds represent two expectant peoples. For Luke the shepherds represent the poor peasant folk of Israel who looked to their God to right the many wrongs they suffered. The magi or wise men represent the world beyond Israel, the pagan world dwelling in darkness and hoping one day to see a great light. What happens when angels visit shepherds' fields and magi visit Jerusalem's royalty provide an instructive contrast. The community for which Matthew wrote would appear to have been composed of Jewish people who had become Christians and of pagan people who were converted to Christian faith. Because each came from very different religious backgrounds there were bound to be difficulties, misunderstandings, and disputes. Throughout his Gospel Matthew tries to meet the concerns of each constituency and to emphasise that what is important is the performance of the will of God and not merely advocating it or having disputes about the finer points.

Luke has a very distinctive emphasis on the poor, the ne'er-do-wells, the outcasts and outsiders, and the have-nots and the powerless. People like Zachariah and Elizabeth, like Mary and Joseph, like Simeon and Anna, are humble, quiet people. Luke would have

well understood that Jesus intended a poor Church for poor people. Matthew proclaims, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). Luke in 6:20 is characteristically blunt: “Blessed are you who are poor”. Full-stop.

And accordingly it is shepherds who, like Zachariah, like Mary, are visited by “an angel of the LORD” (Luke 2:9):

And there were shepherds who lived in the field and who kept watch over their sheep by night. And an angel of the LORD appeared to them and the glory of the LORD shone round them, and they feared with a great fear. And the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid! For, behold! I gospel you with a great joy which will be for all the people. For today in the city of David is born to you a savior who is Christ the Lord”. And this will be the sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,  
and on the earth peace  
among people so favoured.”

We will return to the shepherds when Christmas dawns. For the moment bring them near to the manger in hope an expectation that they will see this great thing which the LORD God has disclosed to them. They represent the lowly people who, according to Luke, are exalted in God’s eyes. These are the people to whom angels speak and to whom is revealed God’s purposes in our world.

## WISE MEN BEARING GIFTS

Amongst some of the very earliest church communities one day stood above all others (with the single exception of Easter Day). Our fathers and mothers in faith celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany with great joy because it was a celebration of the day that God-in-Jesus was revealed to those who sat in darkness. The magi story represents the disclosure to the world of the God of Israel. What ancient prophets had longed for had at last come to pass. St Paul became a Christian three or four years after the death of Jesus. His world-shattering insight was that Jesus was God's gift, not only to Jewish people, but to all the peoples of the world. What was offered to the descendants of Abraham was, said Paul, offered to all humanity. This insight was not welcomed by Jewish people who had embraced faith in Jesus. Some felt that would-be Christians should be required to embrace the Jewish way of life, especially such practices as circumcision (for males), dietary regulations, and other identity markers which all Jews accepted as part and parcel of what it meant to be a religious Jew. To be acceptable to God one had to embrace Jewish ways. Even St Peter seems to have thought that such demands were in accord with what was required to be a Christian.

This was a momentous issue. We can read an account of the matter in Paul's letter to Christians in Galatia (a region now in eastern Turkey) who appear to have deserted Paul's view of the matter and support the teaching of those who demanded that to be a true follower of Jesus one had to live as a Jew. Paul had brought the gospel of the Lord Jesus to Galatia and he was not going to tolerate such distortion:

I am amazed that you so quickly turned away from the one who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel—not that it is a different one, but there are some who trouble you and wish to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel out of heaven gospelled you contrary to our gospeling you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, I repeat again, if anyone is gospeling you other than with what you

received, let him be accursed.

Galatians

1:6-9

For Paul, the matter was revolutionary but could be simply stated:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave  
nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are  
all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

This is what the magi meant to pagan people who became Christians and were assured by Paul that they were a new creation, founded, to be sure, on the faith of the people of Israel but not cribbed, cabined or confined by the identity markers which for so long had helped Jewish people to keep their faith in God. Those who were baptized into Christ did not have to be reborn into Judaism. Matthew's Gospel everywhere champions the deep convictions of St Paul concerning pagan people who became Christians. The magi are presented as the pagans who were guided by God's star come to Jerusalem to worship the child who is born to be King of the Jews. These pagans, carrying gifts rich in symbolism, come to the house where they see "the child with Mary his mother" and fall down in worship before him (Matthew 2:11). The Feast of the Epiphany (as we shall see more clearly on that glorious day) is when we, as our ancestors in faith did, recall that all God's chillun got wings. We will join in worship with those wise men from the east, we will ponder on the rich significance of their gifts, and we will thank God who sees them safely home.

They have not reached Bethlehem yet but they are on the way and they carry the expectancy of pagan peoples who long for a divine sign that they, too, are loved and are not excluded by God from the glory revealed in the little child. God puts the seal of approval on these travelers from afar. And Matthew teaches through them at the beginning what he teaches at the end of his Gospel: true followers of Jesus must go and baptize the world and its peoples.

For the moment, we will set the magi and their camels near but not yet at our crib. They are on their way, full of hopes and guided by their star. They carry the expectations

of the world and their hoping shall not be in vain. We now turn to Luke's Gospel and to the shepherds "out in the field, keeping watch over their sheep by night" (Luke 2:8). They represent all of Israel's hopes. The angel of the LORD will soon gospel them with great joy for all the people" – but not yet.

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