

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON
Second Sunday after Christmas
Sunday, 3rd January 2021



St Matthew's Westminster
MATTHEW 2: 1-12

As we start our journey into the New Year of 2021, perhaps with some feelings of continuing apprehension, mingled with glimmerings of future hope, let's see if we can learn any contemporary lessons from today's Gospel Reading about the Wise Men.

They are enigmatic figures of mystery and legend. They have inspired artists, but baffled realists:

Who were they?

What is their relevance to our lives today?

The term 'Wise Men' is an anglicised misnomer.

Their ancient traditional title "The Magis" is more accurate.

They were nothing like the fairy tale actors who dress up in crowns and robes to appear in school Nativity plays. No. The Magi were real and greatly respected spiritual leaders. We can learn most about them from the pages of the first century Greek historian Herodotus.

Herodotus says that the Magi were a priestly caste of the Median tribes in the Persian Empire. They were so renowned for their learning and erudition that they became teachers to the Kings of Persia.

The Magi were Gentiles practising an unknown religion which some scholars think may have been Zoroastrianism.

Like the Levites of Israel, they were men of holiness and wisdom with a sacerdotal vocation. Their search for religious truth took them into the realms of astronomy, astrology and the interpretation of dreams.

So, we need to note that the first characteristic of the Magi was that they were seekers. And seekers with great expectations of finding a new and Godly King.

The Magi started their journey in hope that they could find the truth about their expectations. And what a journey it must have been.

Well over 1,000 miles by the ship of the desert, the camel, whose uncomfortable humps made them light years removed from the modern cruise ship.

T.S. Eliot in his poem about the Magi "*A cold coming we had of it*", imaginatively portrays the miserable conditions of their winter journey.

In order to complete it, the Magi needed commitment, endurance, patience and perseverance. The navigation methods used by the Magi need not concern us. Sea captains and camel riders steered by the stars for centuries.

In the years around 2 B.C. it so happened that there was a brilliant astronomical conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter which might have guided the Magi to Jerusalem and to the Court of King Herod – but who knows?

What we do know is that the meeting between King Herod and the Magi was the first example of the phenomenon of divisiveness that surrounded Jesus throughout his earthly ministry and ever since. This phenomenon was the clashing contrast between good and evil and between commitment and indifference.

The Magi, seekers after divine truth, represent commitment, goodness and the quest for holiness.

By contrast the tyrant, King Herod, represents self-centredness, hatred, jealousy and brutality, caused by his superstitions and fears of a threat to his throne by the Magi's confidence about the new-born King of the Jews.

Indifference is represented by the Jerusalem elite, priests and scribes. Despite their knowledge of Isaiah's prophecies, they could not be bothered to make the six mile journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to find out more.

Still to this day, indifference to Christ's Kingdom is an enormous roadblock to the spiritual joy to the world we were listening to Handel's *Gloria* a few minutes ago.

It is a reminder of the most significant lines in Matthew's narrative is the one which tells us in verse 10 that when the Magi saw the star had stopped 'they were overwhelmed with joy'.

Then, as now, there is no greater joy in a contemporary life than to discover Christ.

There are contemporary messages too in the gifts the Magi offered to the Christ Child. Their significance is beautifully interpreted in the words of the famous 4th century Epiphany hymn by Prudentius:

"Sacred Gifts of mystic meaning
Incense doth our God disclose.
Gold the King of Kings proclaimeth
Myrrh his sepulchre foreshows."

Here at St Matthew's, we are well-versed in the symbolic meaning of Incense. So we will all have our own spiritual interpretation of the importance of it to our journeys of faith.

But there is a contemporary interpretation to be made about the symbolic gold of kingship or monarchy in our own time. Sometimes we tend to forget that, ever since the days of King Henry VIII, the Head of the Church of England is our Sovereign but we do get reminded of it by the comparatively recent creation of the Royal Christmas Broadcasts.

Almost anyone alive today has only known about two British monarchs. King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II, both blest with a strong Christian faith and both have delivered remarkably effective and powerful spiritual messages in their Christmas broadcasts.

When I was a boy, my Grandmother, like many thousands of other British people, loved to play on her wind-up gramophone a 78rpm record of King George VI's legendary Christmas broadcast in 1939.

It was delivered at a time of great national crisis. Britain had been at war for five months and the early hostilities were not going well. Churchill was not yet Prime Minister. Britain stood alone against the military might of Hitler's Third Reich which was preparing to invade these islands.

And in his 1939 Christmas Broadcast King George VI touched the hearts of the Nation by concluding with a quotation from the poet, Minnie Louise Haskins.

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown!"

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

The King's message rallied the spirit of the Nation. His words showed the golden thread of royal spiritual leadership at its most inspirational.

But I venture to suggest that the Queen's 2020 Christmas Broadcast matched it. For proclaiming her faith in its strongest ever public colours, Her Majesty highlighted the parable of the *Good Samaritan* and its relevance to the pandemic by saying:

"Today ... Good Samaritans have emerged across society, showing care and respect for all, reminding us that each one of us is special and equal in the eyes of God."

Again, the golden thread of royal spiritual leadership.

Perhaps when the Magi came to pay their homage to the infant Christ The King with these gifts of regal Gold they understood that he was going to change the world by his example and leadership.

As for the third the most sombre of the Magi's gifts, Myrrh, this was the universal symbol of death and burial. This was because Myrrh was the embalming ointment throughout the ancient world for the preparation of a body after death.

I digress here for a few seconds to tell you about a conversation I had. On the day when I was ordained as a priest, a senior member of the clergy spoke to me with these words of wisdom and I quote:

"A priest, you know, only has two really important tasks to fulfil.

He should help people to learn to pray.

And he should help people to prepare for their death."

The Magi understood this second priority hence their gift of Myrrh, their harbinger of the mystery of death, the last enemy.

None of us have much clue about this mystery of what happens after our death. Being creatures of time, we have too little interest in the concept of eternity.

In my own perhaps too fearful, spiritual imagination, I rather dread difficult questions which St Peter and the Head Examining Angel are bound to ask me.

In taking this analogy a step further in our imaginations, I wonder how well any of us would score under cross-examination about how we measured up to the standards of the Magi in our lives.

Have we searched diligently enough for Christ and his Divine Truth?

Have we shown sufficient commitment, patience, endurance and perseverance in our uncomfortable journeys towards him?

Have we offered him our own finest and most thoughtful gifts?

Testing questions indeed.

But without going into the answers, there might be a trump card which would get us past the examiners and in through the pearly gates.

This trump card would be to say our personal version equivalent of the remarkable words spoken by the Queen in her Christmas Broadcast this year. Her words were: "The teachings of Christ have served as my inner light, as has the sense of purpose we can find in coming together to worship him."

So perhaps there may be a path running all the way from the mystic movements of the Magi to the shining faith of our Queen right into our own hearts as we face the perils of today's pandemic in the New Year.

If we hold steadfast to this path, we too may find in the Season of Epiphany, like the Magi, "We are overwhelmed with joy." **Amen**