

THE WISE MEN

JANUARY 6, 2008

January 6th is the first Sunday of worship in 2008. This Sunday is also known as Epiphany Sunday. And sometimes, it is called the Festival of the Three Kings.

This celebration originated in the Eastern Church where it was celebrated in honour of the baptism of Jesus. It was considered in the fourth century one of the three principal feasts of the year – Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost. One of the main features of the eastern rites in Epiphany was the solemn blessing of the baptismal water. This continues to this day in the Eastern church.

In the fourth century, Epiphany was introduced into the Western church. In the west, it lost its connection to Christ's baptism. Instead it became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles in the person of the three Magi.

Also in the fourth century, the Western church finally adopted December 25th as the celebration date of Christ's birth. The Eastern church continues to this day to celebrate the nativity on January 6th.

The Magi who came from afar to worship Jesus have traditionally been named Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, though the bible only refers to them as the three magi. Tradition has it that people on this feast day wrote the letters C + M + B for these three names on their doorways with chalk to keep the house safe from fire. These letters gradually evolved to become the first letters of the Latin phrase "Christus Mansionem Benedictat", which means "Christ bless this house."

These three kings by tradition are considered to be magi, probably Zoroastrians from the area of Persia. These men studied the heavens and the arrangement of the stars to glean past and future meanings. It was during these studies that they saw a star which had not been there before and they believed it foretold the birth of a great leader. Full of curiosity, according to the bible accounts, they visited Jesus as a small child, probably not at the first week of his life.

The magi brought with them three gifts which they offered to the child, gold, frankincense and myrrh. By tradition, these gifts are deemed to have the following significance:

- Gold represents Jesus' kingship, not as an earthly king but a heavenly one.
- Frankincense represents Jesus' role as priest, the perfect intermediary between mankind and god.
- Myrrh, associated with death and embalming, represents Jesus' role as Saviour, in connection with his ultimate purpose of sacrificing himself to redeem mankind.

These men journey to Israel and pay a courtesy call on King Herod. Their question to him shook him and disturbed all his courtiers. Where can we find the one who has been born King of the Jews, they ask.

Herod asks these strange men to wait outside and then he consults his priests and scribes. Where does the scripture indicate the Christ is to be born, he asks them. So they say, it is written that it will be in a small town named Bethlehem. And to quote the words “and you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.”

So Herod calls back the magi and asks them to go and find this baby and come back and fill him in on where this birth has occurred and where the baby can be located. He says he too wants to go and worship this King.

We can sense Herod’s fear in all this. From his point of view there was but space for one King and he fully intended it to remain his crown. Let these magi find this child, report back and then Herod would deal with it. No excitement here that God had fulfilled previous promises; just Herod’s anger at the thought it came on his watch and might disturb his reign.

Religious leaders also were annoyed and miffed. If this was indeed the birth so long waited for, God would have told them, for they were the learned and pious ones who would know what to do and how to treat this child. As God had not done so, then clearly this child was one of the many imposter messiahs. Better he die for the sheer cheekiness for daring to claim the status of the Christ.

So the magi journey on and find the child, present their gifts after paying their respects and get up to go back to Herod. But the magi are warned about Herod and slip away another way to avoid Herod.

Then we have Mary and Joseph deciding after the magi visit that they had better get away for a time. They journey to Egypt and stayed there until after Herod’s death some time later. Some of the oldest Christian communities are in Egypt. They are known as Coptics and remain a vital church community to this day. They have always taken great joy in the fact their Lord visited their land Egypt as a baby and found shelter there.

Back to Herod: To use a Nova Scotia phrase, “he was some ticked”. In a rage for being tricked by the magi, he vents his anger on those around him and vows to kill the child. What occurs has been called “the slaughter of the innocents”, the destruction of all baby boys in Bethlehem under two years of age. Reubens, the great artist, has portrayed this in wonderful painting known as the “massacre of the innocents”. The horror of the act should be historic but it occurs today across the world in zones torn apart by strife and tribal hatreds.

So this story of the three kings has many meanings. The first is the recognition of Jesus by gentiles in the person of the magi. To the early church, it was important to find precedents for opening the faith up to non-Jews. This story of the magi is such an incidence of God showing his son to anyone who wants to see regardless of their religion, ethnic origin, sex, social status or faith.

Secondly, the story speaks to the human reaction to anything that threatens the status quo. Here was Herod and the spiritual leaders unwilling even to fathom that the Christ had come. They prayed for this event everyday and yet, when it came, they had fear for their positions rather than joy in the possibility of God breaking into history as it had been promised and foretold.

When God does what we pray for him to do, we are not always as ready to receive God's gift as we had expected we would be.

Probably the best known Epiphany song is "We Three Kings of Orient Are". This was written in 1857 by Reverend John Henry Hopkins, Jr., who wrote both the words and the music as part of a Christmas pageant for the General Theological Seminary in New York City. It first appeared in his work "Carols, Hymns and Song" in 1863.

Hopkins was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1820 and died in Hudson, New York in 1891. He was a clergyman, author, book illustrator, stained glass window designer, and editor of the Church Journal out of New York. He was the son of John Henry Hopkins, the first Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont and the eighth Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America.

The words are interesting and the tune is easy and melodic. It became popular in the early 20th Century when there was a great fondness for sentimental biblical story songs. It was used in school and church school pageants. As a result, the story of the wise men or magi became connected to the nativity story and the nativity scene. Who has not played one of these kings solemnly walking three in a row offering their gifts to the baby lying in a manger.

In many cases the cast members each sang one verse and then finished together.

The magi at the manger seemed to complete the story. Lowly shepherds came to worship but so did learned wise men from afar come to pay homage to this great event in history.

Indeed the Christmas story is a great one for it has great human action – excited and exhausted new parents forced to reside in a barn on the birth night; angels heralding this great event to seemingly the wrong people – shepherds who were on the bottom of the social scale; wise and learned men from abroad sensing correctly that this event was important and special; upset government and spiritual leaders who were afraid this birth might threaten their positions and power; brutality of the powerful in the slaughter of the innocents; young parents fleeing as refugees to a foreign land to save their child.

It is an interesting plot. So interesting in fact, that for 2000 years people have been re-enacting it each year.

Today we complete our Christmas sojourn and look to the Ministry of Christ which we know leads all too quickly to another great story, a drama that ends in the brutal taking of a life only to have God give it an ending no one expected, an ending that changed the world.

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