

Revd Dr Lisa Cornwell

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2019**

**St John the Baptist, Crowthorne**

8 am: Holy Communion

10 am: Sung Eucharist

**EPIPHANY**

Theme: Visitors from the East

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

The Christmas edition of the Church Times featured an article about contentious Christmas carols. A poll has been conducted on Twitter by a Vicar in London. Any guesses as to which the winner was?... *Away in a manger*, with its particularly irksome line “no crying he makes”. It gives rise to the charge of Docetism, a heresy which maintained that Jesus’ bodily form was an illusion rather than genuine. Real babies cry. All parents know that.

Personally, I was surprised that *We three Kings of orient are* didn’t get a mention. Nowhere does it say in scripture that the visitors from the East were kings. Nor does it say that there were three of them; just that there were three gifts.

[The good or bad news, depending on which way you look at it, is that we will not be singing that contended carol today.

However, devotees will be glad to know that we will succumb to *We three Kings* next week at our all-age Epiphany Christingle service. Sometimes we have to resist a hyper-literal reading of carols for the sake of poetry and nostalgia. But that is next week; today we are seekers after truth.]

Our familiar gospel reading today is one of contrasts: between Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, the humble and the arrogant, the shrewd and the naive.

But firstly, who were these mysterious visitors from the East? There are two kings mentioned in the story, King Herod and the child who has been born king of the Jews, but the travellers go by an altogether different description. Matthew calls them “Magi”, translated as “wise men” in the NRSV. Magi were a number of things, but they were certainly *not* kings. Nor, perhaps, should we even think of them as “wise men”.

The first mention of ‘magi’ or ‘wise men’ in the Bible appears way back in the book of Daniel (5.11). They were the wisest in the land of Babylonia, the world power that gave us the basis of modern astronomy (and square roots in maths). And yet, in the account of Daniel 2, they were flummoxed when asked to interpret the King’s dream. It was only the God of Daniel, the Jewish exile, who could give an answer. Something of the God of Israel was known in the empire of Babylon. Daniel predicted a ‘Son of Man’ would come, a term Jesus uses to refer to himself (in Matthew 8.20). Centuries later, magi in the same

tradition as Daniel's contemporaries used their knowledge of the stars to come and look for him.

By the first century, the term 'Magi' referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers. So, think "magicians". Think horoscope fanatics. Think those who claim to tell the future by reading stars, tea leaves, and chicken gizzards. So, for an early reader of Matthew's gospel, the Magi aren't just Gentiles, significant though that is; they represent the height of Gentile idolatry and religious wizardry. But it is these star-gazing, horoscope-writing, would-be magicians who are the heroes in the story. They shouldn't be there. They don't worship the right God or adhere to the right religion or belong to the right race. And yet they are there.

It's possible, then that we could see the Magi as bungling astrologers or sorcerers – more like the Three Stooges than the Three Wise Men! They go to the wrong place. They speak to the wrong person. When they give their gifts, it is gold, frankincense and myrrh, which were elements used in their magic. And yet, by a mysterious combination of God's loving grace and their faithful seeking, they are there as models of

seeking Jesus, believing in Jesus, and worshipping Jesus with what they have. God used what they knew – the stars – and gave them what they didn't know – the Scriptures – to bring them to Christ.

The story of the Magi shows us that God revealed the truth about Jesus to a bunch of pagan fools while those who had the scriptures and were clever enough to work it out for themselves missed out. Their story reminds us that God shows his strength in our weakness, his glory in our humility, his wisdom in our folly to make it clear that everything comes from him and not from ourselves.

This is a lesson which King Herod needed to learn. Puffed up with his own pride and self importance, he was filled with fear and loathing at the prospect of the messiah and sought to take destiny into his own hands. Thankfully he was out-manoeuvred.

The two kings in the drama are poles apart in their leadership styles. The former ruled by tyranny, motivated by self-interest; the latter exemplified self-giving love and service to others. As we evaluate the leaders of our country, or on the world stage, today, we might want to ask the question: who do they more embody - Herod or Jesus?

It is reassuring to know that prayers are still said in the House of Commons. We can hope that the following main prayer is taken to heart: "Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and her government, to Members of Parliament and all in positions of responsibility, the guidance of your Spirit. May they never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind; so may your kingdom come and your name be hallowed. Amen."

This is all the more poignant as divisions within our government and country over Brexit continue to widen rather than heal. As we enter a new year, we need a generous and pioneering spirit, like the magi, to cross boundaries and barriers, and to recognise our global humanity in Christ.

This Epiphany, may the light of Christ be made manifest in all the dark places in our land, so that they, and we, may be transformed by his humility and glory. Amen.