

Epiphany, Years A, B and C

Isaiah 60.1-6 • Psalm 72.[1-9]10-15 • Ephesians 3.1-12 • Matthew 2.1-12

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St Luke's, Chelsea

Sam Hole



David Jones - Three Kings

On the front of your pew sheet you will find one of my favourite images of the Epiphany. Here, in a woodcut by the artist David Jones, is the arrival of the three Magi at Bethlehem. Except this is not Bethlehem in Israel. The tiny village that lies beneath them, and the hills that rise up around them, are Jones's depiction of a small cluster of houses in Wales, in Carmarthenshire...a hamlet that is also called Bethlehem. (It is, apparently, a popular place from which to post your Christmas cards.) Whether in its original Israelite setting or here in the Welsh hills, we might imagine that the Magi are finding their long journey ending in a surprising place.

And yet, perhaps, not so surprising. For as Jones's text at the bottom of the woodcut recognises, Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi is steeped in Old Testament prophecy. 'All shall come from Sheba' reads the Latin, quoting today's first reading from Isaiah (Is 60.6) – and reminding us of Isaiah's promise immediately following that gold and frankincense will be brought. And is the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem really so surprising? Matthew himself suggests not – for when the Magi reach Herod, his chief priests and scribes are immediately able to quote from the prophet Micah. It is from Bethlehem that shall come a 'ruler who is to shepherd [God's] people' (Mt 2.6).

These Magi are evocative figures, left undescribed in Matthew's account. Subsequent Christian imagination has filled out some details. It has drawn from our Isaiah prophecy and today's Psalm (Is 60.3; Ps 72.10) to declare that these visitors were not just Magi but kings. Eighth-century speculation has set their number at three, given them the names of Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar, and made them the representatives of Europe, Asia and Africa, the three continents of the world.

But there is another way of describing these Magi that bears even closer scrutiny. And that is their status as 'wise men', a status I want to dwell on today. For on the one hand, to call the Magi 'wise men' is simply a descriptive translation. It is an appropriate way to translate the word 'magus' – plural 'magi' – a Persian word to describe those skilled in astrology and in the interpretation of omens. And these Magi do indeed display extensive wisdom. From amidst the thousands of silent stars in the unpolluted ancient night sky, they spot one that they recognise is a sign, and they leave all that they know behind to follow that star. They may need the help of Herod's scribes to make it the final seven miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but they do a pretty impressive job of putting their hard-learned skills to a good and rightful purpose. And when the angel warns them not to return to Herod, they heed its call and leave 'for their own country by another road'. Their actions are, in multiple respects, wise.

What's more, the arrival of these Magi heralds a new beginning in world history. When Moses went to Pharaoh to demand that the Israelites be set free from their Egyptian slavery, Pharaoh's 'wise men and sorcerers' (Ex 7.11ff) proved to be no match for the power of God. And when Daniel offered the correct interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the dream that 'the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers' (Dan 2.2) could not understand, we are told that Daniel was made 'chief prefect over all the [Magi] of Babylon' (Dan 2.48). And yet in Matthew's story, for the first time, these Gentile Magi are no longer figures of impotent confusion. For to the place where Jesus lies there come Magi who through their learning have come to encounter the true

God. The good news of God is, as we celebrate today, brought to the whole world in the figures of these wise men.

But the wise men are also, I would suggest, ambiguous figures. For wisdom itself has an ambiguous place in Christian thought. 'Through the church', says Paul in today's New Testament reading, 'the wisdom of God in its rich variety [can now] be made known' (Eph 3.10). And Paul's words echo that rich strand of thought that speaks of wisdom in semi-divine terms: the strand we see in the figure of Lady Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, and in the New Testament applied to Christ 'in whom', as Paul puts it elsewhere, 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col 2.3).

But the scriptures also warn again and again that true faith is not simply a matter of much learning. Jesus thanks God for the things that have been hidden 'from the wise and the intelligent and revealed ... to infants' (Mt 11.25). The 'wisdom of the world', says Paul in a third place, 'is foolishness with God' (1 Col 3.9). Our studies; the books we read; the late night conversations with a friend about the deepest truths in the world – all these can aid us on our journey of faith. But, like the Magi arriving in Jerusalem, we need something more to get us that final stretch to God.

And yet I see this ambiguity too in Jones's woodcut. For on the one side of the Magi shines a star – wonderfully brightly, down onto the place where the infant redeemer is laid. But on the other side of the Magi stands a tree. This tree has lost its two mature limbs, though life now springs out again from its top. The tree is, of course, a reminder of the cross. And if we are to look for those resonances of human inhumanity, of struggle and suffering, perhaps the tree is also a reminder of Jones's experience in the trenches of Passchendaele during World War I. The wisdom of the world is what took Christ to the cross, and has brought war and suffering to millions. The Magi have their faces set in the other direction. They will follow that deeper wisdom of God.

In 1934, T.S. Eliot wrote a pageant play called 'The Rock', to raise funds for the building of forty-five new churches in our own Diocese of London. And as its story of the church in London since its founding neared modern times, Eliot had his Chorus question where our 'endless cycle of idea and action, / Endless invention, endless experiment' has brought us. 'Where' they continued, 'is the Life we have lost in living? / Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'

I wonder if Eliot's words remain just as true for us today. Where, in our information-soaked age, is the knowledge we have lost? What place do we have for wisdom today? For our growth in wisdom – in action and learning put to the right end – is a lifelong journey. And what encouragement do we need, this year, to seek the wisdom of God – by 'following the star' wherever it may

lead, by seeking God in the scriptures and in the breaking of bread, that with the Magi we too may offer ourselves in praise to God, in whom all wisdom is to be found.