

From the rising of the sun

Epiphany One
7th January 2018

Matthew 2:1-12

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Is it Santa Claus or is it Father Christmas? Santa Claus is an American tradition that comes via the influence of Dutch migration and the story of Saint Nicholas. Father Christmas, on the other hand, is a 15th Century British tradition concerning a kind old man who brings the good news of Christmas.

In my family Santa Claus has tended to hold reign. However Father Christmas does get a mention due to my wife's South Australian and, perhaps more English connections.

But in some parts of the world its not Santa Claus or Father Christmas who catches the eye of eager young children hanging out for all kinds of gifts at Christmas. It's the Three Kings!

Places with a strong Spanish influence including Spain itself, Mexico, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Puerto Rico and the Philippines are all involved here. On the night of January 5th or on the morning of January 6th, traditionally seen as the last of the twelve days of Christmas, a special cavalcade or procession takes place as the Three Kings enter villages, towns and cities, usually on horseback, bearing gifts for children.

In the old city quarter of Manilla children leave their shoes out to be filled with sweets and money. Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, grass is cut and placed in special boxes by children for the King's camels and in anticipation that a gift will be left for them.

The visit of the Three Kings, the Three Wise Men or the Magi, as recorded in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel, is commemorated by most churches in the Western tradition on January 6th.

This is actually the observance of Epiphany meaning the "manifestation" or the revelation of God to humankind in Jesus Christ. And this is associated with the visit of these mysterious, largely unknown men "from the east" who come, representing all the nations of the earth, to worship the Christ child.

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These kings, wise men or Magi arrive bearing gifts - gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew's Gospel records them as being "magoi", a term that comes out of ancient Persia and is related to a caste of religious people associated with the interpretation of dreams and the observation of stars.

A number of Bible translations refer to these men as "astrologers" (eg. New English Bible, Twentieth Century New Testament and The Living Bible) while one of the most common translations, found in the New International and the New Revised Standard, speaks about them as being "wise men".

References to "wise men" are common in the Old Testament in relation to people with special insights, great wisdom, an ability to interpret the times and predict the future. Hence, "wise men" in this context makes sense.

Another way of referring to these "magoi" is to call them "kings". But there is nothing in Matthew's Gospel to actually suggest they were rulers of any kind. References to "kings" is more of a tradition that emerged during medieval times. Indeed, we make this claim when sing John Hopkins' lovely carol "We three kings of orient are".

However, there is some benefit in making this claim because it links the "magoi to Old Testament prophesies that describe the long-awaited Messiah as being worshipped by "kings" (eg. Isaiah 60:3; Psalm 68:29; Psalm 72:10).

Now, Matthew's Gospel is the only gospel that records the visit of the "magoi" and it's interesting to note that there is actually no mention of how many people there were. We simply assume there were three because they bore three gifts. In the traditions of Eastern Christianity the "magoi" often number twelve!

Meanwhile, the timing of the "magoi's" visit is also rather vague. Tradition has placed this visit together with the shepherds on the night Jesus was born. But Matthew's Gospel simply says wise men visit Jesus in a house (not a stable) with only his mother present.

It is interesting to note that here Herod, in his vile attempt to kill Jesus as a means of protecting his power and privilege, commands all boys up to the age of two years to be slaughtered in Bethlehem. This suggests the "magoi's" visit may have come as late as even two years after Jesus' birth.



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The “magoi” are said to come “from the East” and, combined with the idea they were astrologers, it is popularly understood these men originate from ancient Persia. However, the term “from the East” more literally means “from the rising of the sun” and there are many theories speculating that the “magoi” came from Arabia, India or even China.

Meanwhile we do not know what happened to the “magoi” after they left to return to their own country. Later traditions claim the “magoi” were so moved by their encounter with Jesus they became his followers to be persecuted and martyred for their faith. Their remains were said to have been interred and venerated in Constantinople and then transferred to Milan.

The “magoi’s” final resting place became Cologne Cathedral in Germany where their bones are said to be housed in the Shrine of the Three Kings.

Friends, we could easily get bogged down trying to make sense of the gaps in this story. We could quickly become tangled up in trying to work out the many unknowns of what’s going on here. But, in doing so, we will really not get that far.

These days our focus on the “magoi”, the three wise men or the three kings of orient seems to be on gift-giving. But, while gift-giving tends to dominate not only the Cavalcade of Three Kings in countries with a Spanish tradition but the whole of Christmas itself - there are more significant things about this story. There are more salient truths that really demand our attention.



The first of these, I believe, is that the “magoi” come to “worship”, they journey to “pay homage” or literally “fall down” and “prostrate” themselves before Jesus. While gifts are important, what’s really significant is that the “magoi” come to revere and adore Jesus. They come to recognize this infant is no ordinary child.

And, secondly, these “magoi”, who “prostrate” themselves before Jesus, are people “from the East”, they are wise men “from the rising of the sun”. And here we need to go back to the Old Testament, some five hundred years, to the prophet Isaiah who writes:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

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Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you.....A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6).

Isaiah's reference to God's glory "rising" upon God's people and the ancient prophet's declaration that "nations shall come to your light" sets up and gives real meaning to Matthew's story of the "magi" - as the "magi" come "from the East", as the wise men appear "from the rising of the sun".

For you see, point of the wise men's visit, the purpose of Matthews' telling of this marvelous story is that, in the coming of the "magi", in the visitation of the wise men "from the East", it is acknowledged that, in the birth of Jesus, dawn has broken, it is declared the darkness is pierced, it is proclaimed the light has risen, salvation has come for all!

Matthew presents the "magi" as enacting, as making real, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. The "magi's" coming "from the East", their arrival "from the rising of the sun" brings into focus the very purpose of Jesus' birth - and that is to manifest God's light and glory among all the nations of the earth.



So, enough about Santa Claus, Father Christmas, the Cavalcade of the Three Kings and a preoccupation on presents!

There is a much bigger thing being spoken about today. And this "big thing" is good news, this "big thing" is quite a momentous story, this "big thing" is actually very, very big - as the brilliance of God's presence and the joy of God's promises are both revealed and acknowledged among all the nations of this earth!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this first Sunday of the year I ask that you to stop and pause for a moment. Contemplate what this story means for you in this rather confusing, troubled, frantic world. Consider how you might respond to the incredible truths brought forth today in the light of your own challenges, your own experiences, fears and joys?

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Now, God doesn't wave a magic wand to make everything suddenly right. There are no quick fixes. God doesn't work like that. Rather, in the story of the "magoi" we catch a glimpse of how it will ultimately be.

In Matthew's account of the "magoi" we are gifted with a vision of what God intends, of what God is in the process of doing and will do. We receive a clear direction of what we are called to both bear witness to and strive for.

Friends, God's presence is yet to be fully revealed. God's promises are yet to be fully realized. But the visitation of the "magoi" says it's happening - and it will.

And because of this we are called to live lives of justice and mercy where both Israeli and Palestinian can embrace Jerusalem as a city of peace. We are called to be a community of compassion where the urgent needs of the world's displaced people become real concerns rather than political footballs fueled by dog whistling and fear.

We are called to be a place of principle and fairness where people can afford a roof over their heads and are able experience meaningful lives together without the constant need to meet unreal expectations or burn the candle at both ends. We are called to be a people of integrity and goodwill where everyone's giftedness - abled and the differently abled - is acknowledged, celebrated and valued.

Friends, the visitation of the "magoi" and all that it means says we should look at ourselves and let go those fears and animosities. It involves saying sorry when we need to. It involves humbly bending our knee before God no matter how unworthy or fraudulent we may feel. It necessitates a need for us to gather regularly as God's people and to celebrate these wonderful truths.

And here we are called to be a people of faith where all of us including the aging, the ill and the housebound no longer fear death but prepare for it as a new relationship with the God who is always there for us!

Friends, the story of the "magoi" challenges us to seriously face and consider such issues.

As 2018 gets underway, let us, like those "magoi" of old, bow down and lay our lives before the child Jesus. For, he is the Light of the World. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Resurrection and the Life. He is Emanuel – God with us now and always!

Amen.

