

Epiphany – the revelation of the nature of Jesus. In our Christian year we mark several such revelations – the wedding at Cana where Jesus changed water to wine; his baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus' many acts of healing and the visit by the Wise Men or Magi, when Jesus was still a young child. This particular revelation has been absorbed into our Christmas celebrations. We give and receive Christmas cards featuring an image of the wise men; no nativity play is complete without the 3 kings and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; many of our carols have lines or verses devoted to these visitors and 2 of our most popular carols, 'We Three Kings' and 'Three Kings from Persian Lands afar', both sung at Christmas, are devoted entirely to this story. These wise men, magi or kings, are an essential part of Christmas.

And yet.....

The latest edition of our Messenger includes an excellent account of our Autumn Study groups by Elizabeth Draper and Ian Cooke refers to them in his equally excellent article 'Rethinking the Commonplace,' also in the same Messenger. Just a quick reminder of the theme of those study sessions. We focussed on the Christmas story asking not 'is this true' but what does it mean?' Can we really believe the elements of the Christmas story? Did it really happen like that? I have to confess that it saddened me to realise that there is no theological substance to the accounts of the nativity which like you, I have grown up with and loved all my life. At the risk of sounding childish, but I want to stay with the Christmas theme, it was rather like the day I realised there was no Father Christmas. Can I not find 'comfort and joy' in the Christmas story? Can I still sing with conviction about stable, shepherds, angels, stars and wise men? Should we be even thinking about wise men on this Sunday in January?

By the end of our study sessions I'm happy to say that the answer to all 3 questions was YES. The Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ were written to affirm the nature of Jesus as the Messiah, a key figure in the relationship between God and his people, and to affirm that nature they draw on references from the Jewish bible, references with which the readers would have been familiar. Let's consider some of the elements of the Epiphany story.

Matthew cites Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus because he needs to establish Jesus as a descendant of David who was himself born in Bethlehem. Further, Micah prophesies 'but you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel.'

The magi or wise men are often referred to as Kings. In our psalm we read, 'The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.' All kings shall bow down before him and all the nations do him service.'

The book of Numbers foretells that 'a star shall come out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.'

Isaiah refers to camels, gold and frankincense; 'a multitude of camels shall cover the and...all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense.'

So yes, I will celebrate and relive the Christmas story each year and find joy in it. I will sing about a stable, a star, angels and shepherds. Everything about the story signifies the importance of Jesus. When we lay aside our belief in Father Christmas surely the realisation that our Christmas morning gifts actually came from our loving and generous parent who probably saved and made sacrifices to give us a magical Christmas morning, is equally wonderful? And I will hold on to the significance of this Epiphany. Let's celebrate the elements of the Epiphany story as further signs that Jesus was and is significant and important; the fulfilment of prophesy; the Son of God, the Light of the World, born into humble circumstances but recognised by the wise and powerful, even seen as a threat by Herod, sent by a loving and generous Father to challenge the old order and overturn injustice, cruelty and oppression with his message of love and redemption.

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