

## Sermon Notes for Epiphany

*"We have seen his star" (Gospel)*

Any casual reader of Scripture knows there were no "kings of Orient". At best, magi were wise men. At worst, magicians like Simon Magus or Elymas in Acts. Matthew might have Balaam in mind because the star, whatever astronomical phenomena there might have been, most certainly fulfils his prophecy (Numbers 24.17, where a star is the sign of a king). I suspect Matthew is dealing heavily in irony. Disreputable characters, using a false technique (if we think there is astrology involved) go to the wrong place (for Jews did not regard the Herods, whichever one is involved, as legitimate rulers) and are put right by revelation (God forcing the chief priests and scribes to tell truth, against their will to flatter Herod). There is even irony in the return by "another way". So this is a sophisticated narrative. I do not say that it is therefore a pure invention. There were such people. They could have such ideas. Just as with Balaam, God is able to overrule corrupt men for his own purposes. What are those purposes?

Not, I think, much about the magi themselves. They vanish from the narrative. What could they have learnt? To fear God, perhaps. They have done the right thing (in offering the gifts prescribed in Psalm 72 for the king) but since they are not Jews, this is human wisdom getting it right accidentally. They could not know what would happen thirty years later, how the kingship would be worked out. They would probably not be alive to see it, just as Balaam prophecies for the "latter days" not his own. At one level, then, an experience without consequences. At another, a sign from God with momentous consequences for the child, the parents and for the church; God could have purposes which went beyond Israel and its needs (rightly or wrongly understood).

The magi vanish, and, the early church (with pagan support) noted that magic (as a successful action though hardly as a deceit) vanished also at the time of the Incarnation. We are perhaps most familiar with this idea in Milton's Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity. Would it were so! Matthew does not say this. He is not interested in the magi for themselves but rather concerned to validate the Epiphany, that is "the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles" (Prayer Book). God shows his hand, and salvation is for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

The lazy modern mind takes this for granted. It does so because, in so far as it thinks at all, it assumes the god of the philosophers, which (for it is a construct, not a person) must be universal. Now philosophers are in this no worse than magi; they are sometimes right. But God did not bring man to knowledge of Himself through philosophy, but by revelation. And not by construction on general principles, but by particularity – by the covenant with "Abraham and his seed, for ever". The general will only become available once the particular has been worked out to its conclusion in Christ. It was not obvious from the first.

We do not discard the Old Testament because the time of ethnic particularity has passed. It remains, for all of us and for all time, the essential starting-point. To say this is only to follow Paul in the Epistle. I suppose both Paul and Matthew are writing a generation after the birth of the universal (not Jewish only) church, and yet for both of them there is still a sense of wonder at it. This has been a surprising dispensation, a mystery which one may validate after the event but could not hope to foresee (it was indeed hidden) beforehand. Paul stresses the validation – that this was "revealed unto his holy Apostles and Prophets by the Spirit" and he is right, this is indispensable. Luke in Acts stresses the sheer fact of the Spirit's driving the Church into the right path, but one must "test the spirits" for not every such drive is of God. We have suffered too many false revelations in the church of late. Matthew has his own way of validating the mystery in the course of his gospel, to show that various words or actions of Jesus prefigured it. I am sure this a process of selection, not invention, though the concluding instruction to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19) might be more of a correct editorial conclusion than a simple report of an event.

Epiphany, then, is not some feeble hangover from Christmas, but an essential truth in its own right. We are called upon to give thanks for this generosity of God; we cannot take it for granted; if we do, we are at risk of ignoring the way God has revealed himself in a very particular and Jewish history and substituting our own notion of what he should have done. And that is idolatry of the most extreme kind.