

Epiphany, 3rd January, 2010 God Seeks Us!

The idea of “journeying in faith” is one of those phrases often heard, often used. People tend to use it to speak of their continuing development of their faith lives as they encounter the ups and downs of life. As Christians, every moment in life is an opportunity to respond to God's hand in the events around us; an opportunity to reflect on and discover where God is in the midst of this circumstance – whether it's the dull routine of daily life, joy or tragedy. We also speak of our journey in terms of our coming to faith, and it's one of my greatest delights to hear all your different stories of how you were drawn towards belief in God, how you've journeyed in that, and also what it is that keeps you faithful. There is such a richness in our stories –each one revealing a God who so individually shows us the way, speaking to us in whispers or shouts, in plain speak or cryptically, sometimes in dreams, sometimes through nature. There's no one way, unlike the assertions I've often heard, that “no-one can become a Christian unless they've heard and responded to the word of God being preached”.

“Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, “where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising. And we have come to pay him homage.”

Who were these “wise men” from the East? How come they were seeking to worship Christ, newborn King of the Jews? They weren't Jews; far from it. They certainly weren't acting in response to hearing the Scriptures, although the Scriptures played a role in locating for them the birth place of this little king as Bethlehem.

The Scriptures don't give us any greater information about the Magi, but scholars digging into other ancient texts tell us that they were likely to have been astrologers, or magi, from the area around Persia – what we now know as the countries of Iraq and Iran. This area was regarded by the Hebrews as alien and enemy territory –it was from the lands to the East that the conquerors of Israel had come; it was to those territories that the Israelites had been exiled.

What makes their journey to pay homage to Jesus quite curious, if not actually staggering, is that they were quite definitely pagans, probably Zoroastrian. They could well have been high ranking political and religious advisors to the rulers of the Medes and Persians. Wise men or magi were often Zoroastrian priests and sometimes they became kings, but above all, they were philosophers and

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astrologers, devoted to the study of the sciences, especially astrology and astronomy.

So what were these magi – these sages or priests that followed other notions of God and heavenly things, doing in pursuing this baby? It seems they dropped everything they were doing, and took off, leaving their home and country to seek this newborn king of the Jews. What they had discerned in their study of the stars must have been extraordinarily compelling. We don't know whether there was an actual star they were following – and there's plenty of academic theories about that; or whether they'd discovered a "star rising" through their very refined study of horoscopes. One commentator suggests that the star "was not necessarily an extraordinary celestial event, but an ordinary star seen through the extraordinary eyes of the magi".¹ Whatever the situation was, whether a visible star or a sign from the horoscope, there was a significance that drew these magi to seek out this baby king.

Let's think through this carefully. The magi began their journey, not drawn by God speaking through his Scriptures, but through other means – through the stars, nature, and through their own pagan tradition of interpretation of stars – which in itself had long been forbidden to Jews in their religious tradition and laws. In this, we can find another perspective: this is a journey that can be traced both as the Magi seeking the King – that is, the individual's faith journey; and as God revealing himself to the Magi, for *God's* long-reaching purposes.

Notice how the Gospel writer Matthew treats this story. He's writing for a specifically Jewish community, and so places this story in the wider context of Jewish history. The story resonates with familiar signposts from the Hebrew Scriptures – Matthew is at pains to assure his community that they belong in the story. Yet at the same time he is carefully drawing the picture early in the Gospel that this Jesus is not only King of the Jews, he is the King of all nations and all people. This God, revealed in this baby born in Bethlehem, is already breaking down old divisions. Divisions about whom God reveals himself to; who is acceptable to God; how far God's reach of grace is.

This is a shocking revelation for those who considered themselves to be God's people – the idea that impure Gentiles were as acceptable to God as they were. Matthew wants his audience to get the message that God's grace is universal, stretching out to encompass unlikely and objectionable people – people considered to be outsiders, unacceptable and unclean according to the Hebrew religious tradition. Later in the Gospel we'll find the adult Jesus consorting with and welcoming sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors and all the riff-raff of society.

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Here, right at his birth, we have the first glimpses of his new social order, of the kingdom of God he proclaims: a lowly birth, his first visitors shepherds – hardly the esteemed of the community; and then sought out and worshipped by pagan magicians.

How might we enter this story? Unlike Matthew's first century community, we miss the political, social and religious impact of these visiting Persians – the strangeness and unacceptability of it all. For us, it's mostly become a rather lovely, oft-repeated story accompanying Christmas. Yet there is meaning for us, and a resonance and invitation that cuts across centuries and cultures. This God welcomes the worship of all people everywhere. More to the point, this God seeks out all people everywhere –this is not so much of a story of the magi seeking God, but of God seeking, calling, drawing them to himself.

And this is my emphasis today. God seeks us. And this God is not going to stick within the confines of our human-made religious notions of the ways he draws people to himself. Astrological readings would seem way outside what we – the religious ones – would want to name as God working.

The journey of the magi, with all its peculiarities and particularities of its time and place, speaks to us of the possibilities and potentials of our own faith journeys. There's an invitation to us to be alert to the ways in which God is seeking you, drawing you to himself; anywhere along your journey of faith. Not just drawing you to an initial believing, but continuing to draw you closer to himself. It could be through conventional ways, through his scriptures, through worship, through the Eucharist. The magi had to stop in Jerusalem to consult with the religious scholars about what the Scriptures said about this birth. But it could also be through such unexpected and unconventional ways that unless we're attuned to looking for and seeking to hear God in our lives, we might miss his voice, his signs, his invitations to see life through his heart and eyes. God conducts God's business in ways that never cease to disrupt, surprise and even dismantle some of our most prized assumptions. That is one of the ways we can know it is God's ways and not ours!

Your take home question for reflection: where do you find yourself in this story? Is there something in and around your life that could be revealing Christ to you, that could be drawing you to journey and to worship?

ⁱ William Herzog