

The wise men

Wesley Uniting Church 8th January 2017

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Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-14

Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

Few stories have captured our human imagination as intensely as the story of the wise men visiting the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Over the centuries songwriters, storytellers, artists, poets – as well as producers of Christmas cards – have told and retold the story countless millions of times. And in doing so they have added to the simple Bible story, building on it by making the wise men kings, by adding names and camels and stable.

As I thought about it this week I came up with six popular additions to the story that are not found anywhere in the straightforward New Testament narrative: characterising them as kings from different parts of the world, making their number three where the Bible simply says there's more than one, having them visit Jesus in the stable rather than the house referred to in the Bible story, having them travel on camels when it's at least as likely they were on horses, giving them names of Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, and having them visit around the 12th day of Christmas when it's more likely they arrived 12 or 18 months after Jesus' birth.

Mind you, there are some additions to the story which I quite like. A recent invention is the visit of the three wise women. Their visit is a little different to the men's. The wise women are said to have been much more willing to ask directions on the way, they arrived on time, they immediately set to and cleaned the house, and they brought useful gifts such as nappies, baby clothes and a casserole or two.

In passing let me note the reasoning behind one or two of the most popular additions to the story. The notion that the wise men were kings is drawn from Isaiah 60 where it says kings shall come to the brightness of God's dawn (vs 3), and from Psalm 72, where it says that all kings shall bow down before God's Son (vss 10-11) - and note that Matthew tells us that the wise men knelt down before Jesus. The notion that they travelled on camels is drawn also from Isaiah 60, where it refers to camels and gifts of gold and frankincense in the one verse (vs 6).

But who were these wise men and where did they come from? All we really know is that they came from the east, as Matthew tells us. Taking that direction along with their obvious knowledge of astronomy, the likelihood is that they were from Persia, where astrology and astronomy were highly regarded. They may even have been from the Zoroastrian religion, in which astrology was highly valued.

And what was the significance of the three gifts? Traditionally gold was a gift fit for a king; frankincense was regarded as priestly, used in worship as a perfume to symbolise the presence of God; and myrrh was a traditional oil used in preparing bodies for burial, perhaps foreshadowing that Jesus was to have a significant death. So the three gifts, while perhaps not as useful as nappies or casseroles, were nevertheless quite meaningful.

The more useful question of course is what does the visit of the wise men teach us today? I want to suggest there are at least four learnings from the wise men that are still relevant and important for us today.

First, and least, is the practice of Christmas gift-giving. If it wasn't for the example of the wise men, we might not have the huge industry of giving gifts at Christmas. This modelling by the wise men is confirmed by the practice in some countries of giving gifts at Epiphany rather than on Christmas Day – for example, in Spain or Mexico or parts of Italy. It's also confirmed by the practice in parts of Spain of believing that Christmas gifts come from the wise men rather than from Santa Claus – and in some Spanish department stores in the weeks leading to Epiphany children will sit on the knees of a wise man dressed as a king rather than a Santa Claus. So be thankful for the leadership of the wise men, otherwise you might not be sitting here today with a nice Christmas cushion or a box of chocolates in your fridge or a new book to read on your beach holiday.

Second, and much more importantly, the visit of the wise men shows us that the birth of Jesus is a big event. It's much more than just a local happening, or of significance only to Jewish people. It has a worldwide significance. It's this meaning that has contributed over the centuries to the notion that the wise men were kings and that they came from places like Arabia, India and Persia, or even from as far afield as China in some medieval legends. The wise men are undoubtedly Gentiles. Jesus' birth is for all people, not just for the people of Judea or Galilee. The fact of God's love for all people is then of course a major focus during the ministry of Jesus.

Then a third meaning. The visit of the wise men begins the opposition which Jesus will face throughout his life. Herod plots to have the baby Jesus killed. The wise men are guided not to collude with Herod, but Herod sends soldiers to kill all children in Bethlehem up to 2 years old. If you go to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem today, you can see the collection of children's bones which theoretically come from 2000 years ago, from the massacre of the innocents. The mission of Jesus to bring God's love and forgiveness meets with antagonism and conflict from the very beginning.

And a fourth meaning, by contrast, is that of joy. We are told by Matthew that the wise men, on arrival in Bethlehem and finding Jesus and Mary, were "overwhelmed with joy". Any recognition of who Jesus is, any revelation or epiphany that Jesus has come to bring God's love and forgiveness to the whole world, surely brings a sense of deep joy, a joy that not even the knowledge of opposition to Jesus can erase, a joy that enables us to give of ourselves as disciples of Jesus even if such service is hard or costly.

Would you turn in your hymnbooks again to hymn 291? Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was a Roman born in northern Spain in 348 AD. He served as a provincial governor within the Roman empire and in his middle years as a senior government figure in Rome. But he retired early, when he was around 50 years old and spent the rest of his life as a Christian poet and writer, living very humbly and simply as a person of deep personal faith. Many of his writings have survived, including hymn 291 with all its coverage of the wise men and the meanings of the wise men's visit. But it's hymn 290 I want to conclude with. It's a magnificent rendering of the meaning of Christmas – vs 1 about the incarnation, God in human form; vs 2 about the salvation brought by God in Jesus for the whole human race; vs 3 about the fulfilment of age-old longings for God to act; and vs 4 about the praise that is the only logical response to the gift of Jesus.

The wise men still have much to teach us. Let's respond by singing with joy this ancient hymn about Christmas: hymn 290, "Of the Father's love begotten".

To the glory of God, Amen.